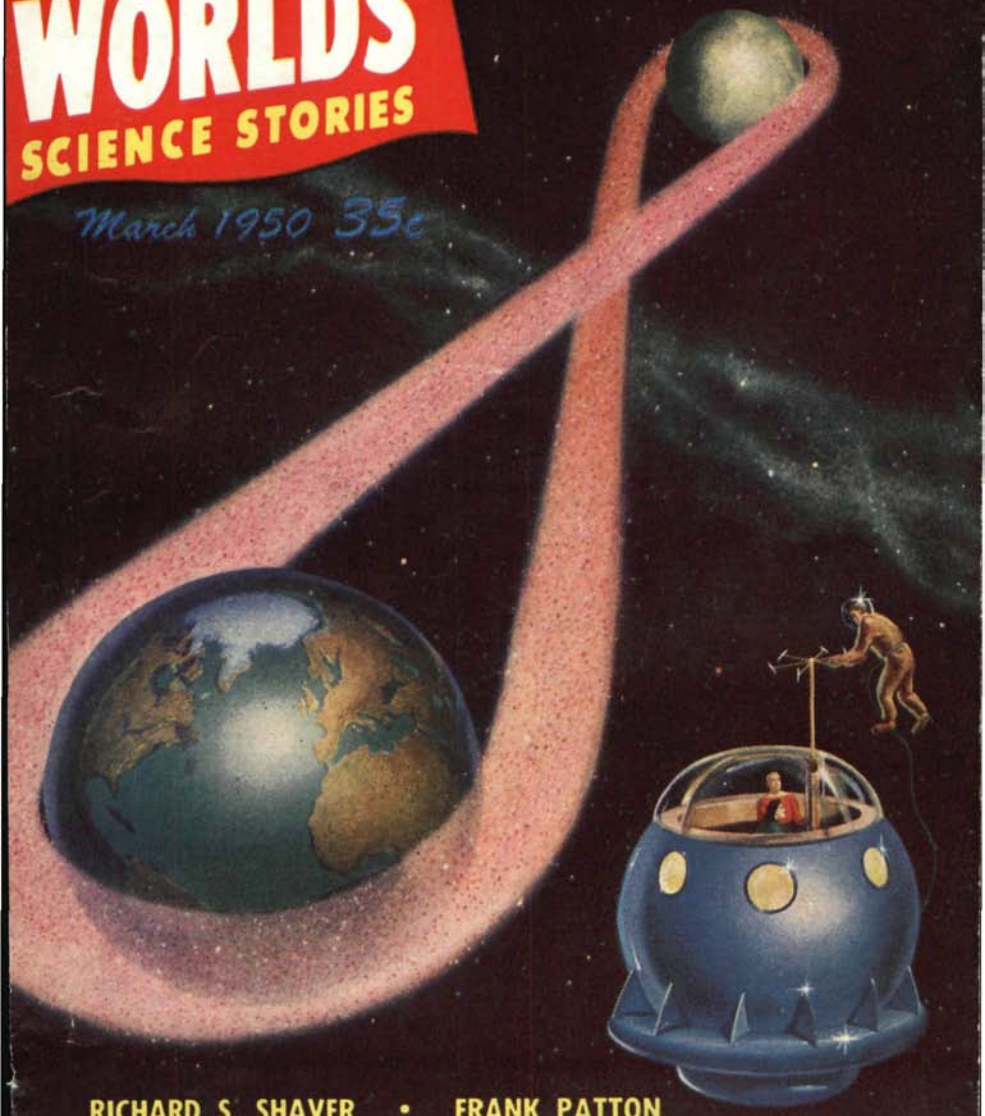
OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES

March 1950 35c

LIVE IN AN ORBIT AND LIKE IT!

By CRAIG BROWNING



RICHARD S. SHAVER • FRANK PATTON

AY BRADBURY • HENRY HASSE • ROG PHILLIPS

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EDITORIAL

THIS is issue number three of OTHER WORLDS. And this is the issue we mentioned in our speech at the World Science Fiction Convention in Cincinnati back in September as the one we'd like science fiction fans to use as a criterion of what sort of a magazine we really intended to put out. There were a good many reasons why we felt that issues one and two could be improved upon. They were good enough, true, good enough to have been published by us as editors of *Amazing Stories*. We even felt that the stories were superior, each in its own field, but we felt the field was not broad enough. In a way, we had little choice in the selection of the stories for those issues. To tell you the truth, some of the authors concerned donated their manuscripts, just to aid in getting the magazine started. We want to thank Rog Phillips, Richard S. Shaver, and John Wiley especially for their contributions. There were other reasons we won't go into.

Now that we've reached issue number three, let's analyze it in the way a reader would analyze it, not as an editor. Your editor, having been a fan for twenty-four years, and now taking over OTHER WORLDS, is still a fan, and he thinks he can look at the magazine as just ordinary Joe Reader would.

As a fan, we wanted OTHER WORLDS to be better than the average science fiction magazine, and we wanted it to stay out of any narrow policy rut. We wanted it to be truly representative of all the best things we'd ever read. We admire much about the policy of *Astounding Science Fiction,* but we believe it is too specialized. Perhaps if we used about twenty percent of that type of story, we'd strike a happy medium. We, naturally, liked *Amazing* and *Fantastic;* the first for such things as the stories which caused it to be called "the aristocrat of science fiction" and such things as the rather daring fields into which it ventured, and the latter because it printed what we consider some of the best fantasy-type stories. We like fantasy, but we don't like it overdone. Again, a small percentage of both magazines' policy seemed like a good idea. Then there were the other magazines, concentrating on interplanetary, on adventure, on action. Some of that was in order also. But lastly, we wanted something no other magazine, except possibly *Astounding,* has dared to put into science fiction—a truly adult approach. We believe science fiction readers are among the top twenty percent in intelligence and in maturity insofar as the mental development of the world's citizens are concerned. They read for entertainment, because their ability to be entertained is higher than average, but they read also for many other reasons. They can

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relax, while reading a story, which is what the editorial policy of *Amazing* aims at, but they can also *think*, which is what the editorial policy of *Amazing* denies they can do. Your new editor ought to know—he guided the destinies of *Amazing* for twelve years. The policy is fine, it makes a lot of money. But we aren't interested in making a lot of money—just a living. Believe it or not, your editor is publishing OTHER WORLDS because he's a fan, and likes to publish it!

So, let's take the stories in this issue, and see if we're just pushing the breeze, or whether we've really backed up our ideas with facts.

We believe that Henry Hasse's story in this issue isn't his best—but we think it has an element in it that typifies something John W. Campbell, Jr. would like, but reject because it was just a little too dramatic, and on the action side. We believe this, because Henry told us that was the reaction. In other words, here is an *Astounding* reject. We leave it up to you—is it a story that should be rejected by an editor who says he *likes* it, but has to reject it because the magazine's policy just doesn't go for that sort of thing? We believe not. We, like Campbell, liked the story. We *give* it to you.

Then there is Ray Bradbury, who gives us "Punishment Without Crime" which in our opinion, is typical of the good stories Ray always writes. Not his best, naturally, but one that would be published without question even if we did not present it. This one is adult. And it has an intellectual impact in its significance.

Next we have Alma Hill, with a manuscript that came in cold, in the mail. It's humor. We think it is adult humor, and yet should prove good for a laugh even with our youngest reader. It isn't clever, only funny. And it's very, very well written. We've said we think humor should be a regular bit on the bill of fare, and we hope we can continue presenting stories as spontaneous as this.

F. Anton Reeds, another writer who crosses our desk for the first time, hit us right in the eyes with "The Wee Bonnie Poupon." This is the type of story that made *Amazing* stand out in the old days. And yet this isn't an old story. Added to its general appeal, it has a very fine O. Henry ending that will give you that surprise in the last few paragraphs that you do not expect. Mr. Reeds can come back at us any time he wants to!

Fantasy? How about "Marai's Wife" by Edwin Benson? The old *Weird Tales*, in its heyday under Farnsworth Wright, occasionally ran one like this, and with telling effect. We hope we've presented something here that the beloved Wright would have liked.

Craig Browning, of course, is always very clever, and here, in "Live in an Orbit and Love It!" he has put together a really clever story. In this one, an interplanetary real estate operator with slightly shady tactics is very deftly put into the shade. The science here is excellent, and backs up the story very nicely.

(Continued on page 22)

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PUNISHMENT WITHOUT CRIME

By RAY BRADBURY

When murder enters a man's heart, blood must be shed. Marionettes offered the ideal answer—you killed, and nobody got hurt! Certainly that wasn't a crime . . . not even your conscience would accuse you.

THE sign on the door said: MARIONETTES, INC.

"You wish to kill your wife?" said the dark man at the desk.

"Yes. No . . . not exactly. I mean . . ."

"Name?"

"Hers or mine?"

"Yours."

"George Hill."

"Address?"

"11 South St. James, Glenview."

The man wrote this down, emotionlessly. "Your wife's name?"

"Katherine."

"Age?"

"Thirty-one."

Then came a swift series of questions. Color of hair, eyes, skin, favorite perfume, texture and size index. "Have you a dimensional photo of her? And her lipstick . . . ?"

An hour later, George Hill was perspiring.

"That's all." The dark man arose and scowled. "You still want to go through with it."

"Yes."

"Sign here."

He signed.

"You know this is illegal?"

"Yes."

"And that we're in no way responsible for what happens to you as a result of your request?"

"For God's sake!" cried George. "You've kept me long enough. Let's get on!"

The man smiled faintly. "It'll take three hours to prepare the marionette of your wife. Sleep awhile, it'll help your nerves. The third mirror room on your left is unoccupied."

George moved in a slow numbness to the mirror room. He lay on the blue velvet cot, his body pressure causing the mirrors in the ceiling to whirl. A soft voice sang, "Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep . . ."

George murmured. "Katherine, I

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"Come to business," she said. "You came here to talk to me about Leonard? You know I love him, don't you?" He reached for the gun. "Stop it!" he said harshly. "I don't want to kill you."

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didn't want to come here. You forced me into it. You made me do it. God, I wish I wasn't here. I wish I could go back. I don't want to kill you."

The mirrors glittered as they rotated softly.

He slept.

He dreamed he was forty-one again, he and Katie running on a green hill somewhere with a picnic lunch, their helicopter beside them. The wind blew Katie's hair in golden strands and she was laughing. They kissed and held hands, not eating. They read poems; it seemed they were always reading poems.

Other scenes. Quick changes of color, in flight. He and Katie flying over Greece and Italy and Switzerland, in that clear, long autumn of 1997! Flying and never stopping!

And then—nightmare. Katie and Leonard Phelps. George cried out in his sleep. How had it happened? Where had Phelps sprung from? Why had he interfered? Why couldn't life be simple and good? Was it the difference in age? George touching fifty, and Katie so young, not yet twenty-eight? Why, why?

The scene was unforgettably vivid. Leonard Phelps and Katherine in a green park beyond the city. George himself appearing on a path only in time to see the kissing of their mouths.

The rage. The struggle. The attempt to kill Leonard Phelps.

More days, more nightmares.

George Hill awoke, weeping.

"Mr. Hill, we're ready for you now."

Hill arose clumsily. He saw himself in the high and now silent mirrors, and he looked all fifty of his years. It had been a wretched error. Better men than he had taken young wives only to have them dissolve away in their hands like sugar crystals under water. He eyed himself, monstrously. A little too much stomach. A little too much chin. Somewhat too much pepper in the hair and not enough in the limbs. . . .

The dark man led him to a room.

George Hill gasped. "This is *Katie's* room!"

"We try to have everything perfect."

"It *is*, to the last detail!"

George Hill drew forth a signed check for ten thousand dollars. The man departed with it.

The room was silent and warm.

George sat and felt for the gun in his pocket. A lot of money. But rich men can afford the luxury of cathartic murder. The violent unviolence. The death without death. The murder without murdering. He felt better. He was suddenly calm. He watched the door. This was a thing he had anticipated for six months and now it was to be ended. In a moment the beautiful robot, the stringless marionette would appear, and . . .

"Hello, George."

"Katie!"

He whirled.

"Katie." He let his breath out.

She stood in the doorway behind him. She was dressed in a feather-soft green gown. On her feet were

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woven gold-twine sandals. Her hair was bright about her throat and her eyes were blue and clear.

He did not speak for a long while. "You're beautiful," he said at last, shocked.

"How else could I be?"

His voice was slow and unreal. "Let me look at you."

He put out his vague hands like a sleepwalker. His heart pounded sluggishly. He moved forward as if walking under a deep pressure of water. He walked around and around her, touching her.

"Haven't you seen enough of me in all these years?"

"Never enough," he said, and his eyes were filled with tears.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Give me time, please, a little time." He sat down weakly and put his trembling hands to his chest. He blinked. "It's incredible. Another nightmare. How did they *make* you?"

"We're not allowed to talk of that; it spoils the illusion."

"It's magic!"

"Science."

Her touch was warm. Her fingernails were perfect as seashells. There was no seam, no flaw. He looked upon her. He remembered again the words they had read so often in the good days. *Thou art fair, my love. Behold, thou art fair; Thou hast dove's eyes within thy locks. Thy lips are like a spread of scarlet. And thy speech is comely. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies. There is no spot in thee.*

"George?"

"What?" His eyes were cold glass.

He wanted to kiss her lips.

Honey and milk are under thy tongue.

And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.

"George."

A vast humming. The room began to whirl.

"Yes, yes, a moment, a moment." He shook his humming head.

How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman

. . .

"How did they do it?" he cried. In so short a time. Three hours, while he slept. Had they melted gold, fixed delicate watchsprings, diamonds, glitter, confetti, rich rubies, liquid silver, copper thread? Had metal insects spun her hair? Had they poured yellow fire in moulds and set it to freeze?

"No," she said. "If you talk that way, I'll go."

"Don't!"

"Come to business, then," she said, coldly. "You want to talk to me about Leonard."

"Give me time, I'll get to it."

"Now," she insisted.

He knew no anger. It had washed out of him at her appearance. He felt childishly dirty.

"Why did you come to see me?" She was not smiling.

"Please."

"I insist. Wasn't it about Leonard? You know I love him, don't you?"

"Stop it!" He put his hands to his ears.

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She kept at him. "You know, I spend all of my time with him now. Where you and I used to go, now Leonard and I stay. Remember the picnic green on Mount Verde? We were there last week. We flew to Athens a month ago, with a case of champagne."

He licked his lips. "You're not guilty, you're *not*." He rose and held her wrists. "You're fresh, you're not *her*. *She's* guilty, not you. You're different!"

"On the contrary," said the woman. "I *am* her. I can act only as she acts. No part of me is alien to her. For all intents and purposes we are one."

"But you did not do what she has done!"

"I did all those things. I kissed him."

"You can't have, you're just born!"

"Out of her past and from your mind."

"Look," he pleaded, shaking her to gain her attention. "Isn't there some way, can't I—pay more money? Take you away with me? We'll go to Paris or Stockholm or any place you like!"

She laughed. "The marionettes only rent. They never sell."

"But I've money!"

"It was tried, long ago. It leads to insanity. It's not possible. Even this much is illegal, you *know* that. We exist only through governmental sufference."

"All I want is to live with you, Katie."

"That can never be, because I am Katie, every bit of me is her. We do not want competition. Marionettes can't leave the premises; dissection might reveal our secrets. Enough of this. I warned you, we mustn't speak of these things. You'll spoil the illusion. You'll feel frustrated when you leave. You paid your money, now do what you came to do."

"I don't want to kill you."

"One part of you does. You're walling it in, you're trying not to let it out."

He took the gun from his pocket. "I'm an old fool, I should never have come. You're so beautiful."

"I'm going to see Leonard tonight."

"Don't talk."

"We're flying to Paris in the morning."

"You heard what I said!"

"And then to Stockholm." She laughed sweetly and caressed his chin. "My little fat man."

Something began to stir in him. His face grew pale. He knew what was happening. The hidden anger and revulsion and hatred in him was sending out faint pulses of thoughts. And the delicate telepathic web in her wondrous head was receiving the death thoughts. The marionette. The invisible strings. He himself manipulating her body.

"Plump, odd little man, who once was so fair."

"Don't," he said.

"Old while I am only twenty-seven, ah, George, you were blind, working years to give me time to fall in love again. Don't you think Leonard is lovely?"

He raised the gun blindly.

"Katie."

"His head is as the most fine gold

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—" she whispered.

"Katie, don't!" he screamed.

"His locks are bushy and black as a raven, his hands are as gold rings set with the beryl!"

How could she speak that song! It was in *his* mind, how could *she* mouth it!

"Katie, don't make me do this!"

"His cheeks are as a bed of spices," she murmured, eyes closed, moving about the room softly. *"His belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires; his legs are as pillars of marble—"*

"Katie!" he shrieked.

"His mouth is most sweet—"

One shot.

"—this is my beloved—"

Another shot.

She fell.

"Katie, Katie, Katie!"

Four more times he pumped bullets into her body.

She lay shuddering. Her senseless mouth clicked wide and some insanely warped mechanism had her repeat again and again, "beloved, beloved, beloved, beloved, beloved . . ."

George Hill fainted.

He awakened to a cool cloth on his brow.

"It's all over," said the dark man.

"Over?" George Hill whispered.

The dark man nodded.

George Hill looked weakly down at his hands. They had been covered with blood. When he fainted he had dropped to the floor. The last thing he remembered was the feeling of the real blood pouring upon his hands in a freshet.

His hands were now clean washed.

"I've got to leave," said George Hill.

"If you feel capable."

"I'm all right." He got up. "I'll go to Paris now, start over. I'm not to try to phone Katie or anything, am I?"

"Katie is dead."

"Yes. I killed her, didn't I? God, the blood, it was *real!*"

"We are proud of that touch."

He went down in the elevator to the street. It was raining and he wanted to walk for hours. The anger and destruction were purged away. The memory was so terrible that he would never wish to kill again. Even if the real Katie were to appear before him now, he would only thank God, and fall senselessly to his knees. She was dead now. He had had his way. He had broken the law and no one would know.

The rain fell cool on his face. He must leave immediately, while the purge was in effect. After all, what the use of such purges if one took up the old threads? The marionettes' function was primarily to prevent *actual* crime. If you wanted to kill, hit or torture someone, you took it out on one of those unstringed automatons. It wouldn't do to return to the apartment now. Katie might be there. He wanted only to think of her as dead, a thing attended to in deserving fashion.

He stopped at the curb and watched the traffic flash by. He took deep breaths of the good air and began to relax.

"Mr. Hill?" said a voice at his

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elbow.

"Yes?"

A manacle was snapped to Hill's wrist. "You're under arrest."

"But—"

"Come along. Smith, take the other men upstairs, make the arrests!"

"You can't do this to me," said George Hill.

"For murder, yes, we can."

Thunder sounded in the sky.

It was eight fifteen at night. It had been raining for ten days. It rained now on the prison walls. He put his hands out to feel the drops gather in pools on his trembling palms.

A door clanged and he did not move but stood with his hands in the rain. His lawyer looked up at him on his chair and said, "It's all over. You'll be executed tonight."

George Hill listened to the rain.

"She wasn't real. I didn't kill her."

"It's the law, anyhow. You remember. The others are sentenced, too. The president of Marionettes, Incorporated, will die at midnight. His three assistants will die at one. You'll go about one-thirty."

"Thanks," said George. "You did all you could. I guess it was murder, no matter how you look at it, image or not. The idea was there, the plot and the plan was there. It lacked only the real Katie herself."

"It's a matter of timing, too," said the lawyer. "Ten years ago you wouldn't have got the death penalty. Ten years from now you wouldn't, either. But they had to have an object case, a whipping boy. The use of marionettes has grown so in the last year it's fantastic. The public must be scared out of it, and scared badly. God knows where it would all wind up if it went on. There's the spiritual side of it, too, where does life begin or end, are the robots alive or dead? More than one church has been split up the seams on the question. If they aren't alive, they're the next thing to it, they react, they even think; you know the 'live robot' law that was passed two months ago; you come under that. Just bad timing, is all, bad timing."

"The government's right. I see that now," said George Hill.

"I'm glad you understand the attitude of the law."

"Yes. After all, they can't let murder be legal. Even if it's done with machines and telepathy and wax. They'd be hypocrites to let me get away with my crime. For it *was* a crime. I've felt guilty about it ever since. I've felt the need of punishment. Isn't that odd? That's how society gets to you. It makes you feel guilty even when you see no reason to be . . ."

"I have to go now. Is there anything you want?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"Goodbye then, Mr. Hill."

The door shut.

George Hill stood up on the chair, his hands twisting together, wet, outside the window bars. A red light burned in the wall suddenly. A voice came over the audio: "Mr. Hill, your wife is here to see you."

He gripped the bars.

"She's dead," he thought.

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"Mr. Hill?" asked the voice.

"She's dead. I killed her."

"Your wife is waiting in the anteroom, will you see her?"

"I saw her fall, I shot her, I saw her fall dead!"

"Mr. Hill, do you hear me?"

"Yes!" he shouted, pounding at the wall with his fists. "I hear you. I hear you! She's dead, she's dead, can't she let me be! I killed her, I won't see her, she's dead!"

A pause. "Very well, Mr. Hill," murmured the voice.

The red light winked off.

Lightning flashed through the sky and lit his face. He pressed his hot cheeks to the cold bars and waited, while the rain fell. After a long time, a door opened somewhere onto the street and he saw two caped figures emerge from the prison office below. They paused under an arc light and glanced up.

It was Katie. And beside her, Leonard Phelps.

"Katie!"

Her face turned away. The man took her arm. They hurried across the avenue in the black rain and got into a low car.

"Katie!" He wrenched at the bars. He screamed and beat and pulled at the concrete ledge. "She's alive! Guard! Guard! I saw her! She's not dead, I didn't kill her, now you can let me out! I didn't murder anyone, it's all a joke, a mistake, I saw her, I saw her! Katie, come back, tell them, Katie, say you're alive! Katie!"

The guards came running.

"You can't kill me! I didn't do anything! Katie's alive, I saw her!"

"We saw her, too, sir."

"But let me free, then! Let me free!" It was insane. He choked and almost fell.

"We've been through all that, sir, at the trial."

"It's not fair!" He leaped up and clawed at the window, bellowing.

The car drove away, Katie and Leonard inside it. Drove away to Paris and Athens and Venice and London next spring and Stockholm next summer and Vienna in the fall.

"Katie, come back, you can't *do* this to me!"

The red tail-light of the car dwindled in the cold rain. Behind him, the guards moved forward to take hold of him while he screamed.

THE END

"PLAIN, ORDINARY BRASS"

Out of Castaic, California comes the latest "scientific" gem. If you'll remember, that's where the latest gold strike was made. Here it is:

"California's latest gold strike petered out today almost as quickly as it started when an assayer's report said there is some gold in the ground near here all right, but most of the findings are plain, ordinary brass."

That's what the man said!
Brass!
An assayer said that!
Yes, he did!

But the real "gem" here is the fact that the gold strike was made 120 feet down by a man drilling a well! What *we* want to know, is how did brass, an alloy, get there? Maybe a lost civilization lies beneath Castaic!

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NORTE AMERICANOS, YOU ARE DOOMED!

By ALMA HILL

"I can make with the fission!" boasted Enrico, and he proved it, not only to Conchita, but to the whole family. Then dreams of war and conquest filled the little valley—and frightened the cows.

ON THE Hacienda Macartney there are, *seguramente,* cows. Multitudes of cows. But at the Macartney home place there are to be seen only pigeons—multitudes of pigeons. Pigeons on the roof of the great house, of the kitchens, the horse barns, the sheds of the peons—on every roof pigeons, except on the roof of the pigeon loft.

And for why? For because pigeons do not love a roof that is full with holes, not even holes of gold.

Si, verdad. A roof of gold lace—

No, not such a rich ranch—

No, only a year or so ago—

Dios, it is all a great secret. If you must hear—but remember, not a word to the *politicos!*

Picture to yourself, then, a dark-haired youth who is tinkering with a machine in this pigeon loft. All over this machine is the glitter of loving care. The brass levers are like jewelers' work; even the engraved mottoes and doves on the huge balance wheels have been cleaned and burnished.

Through round holes in the roof the late red sunlight stands in thick poles. There is a sharp smell of pigeon droppings and an evil smell of ancient packing tallow. Young Enrico is reaching into a joint of the machine for a last black chink of this tallow. He takes off his silk shirt, and with this he polishes.

Then he stands back for a moment of pride. Eagerly, he eases down on a master lever. The machine turns, the giant beams of the loft answer a whispering vibration.

Now he jams home the lever and the machine jumps on the floor. Enrico is used to this; he jumps also and so keeps his hold on the master lever. The wheels turn with blinding speed and then sigh into silence as Enrico

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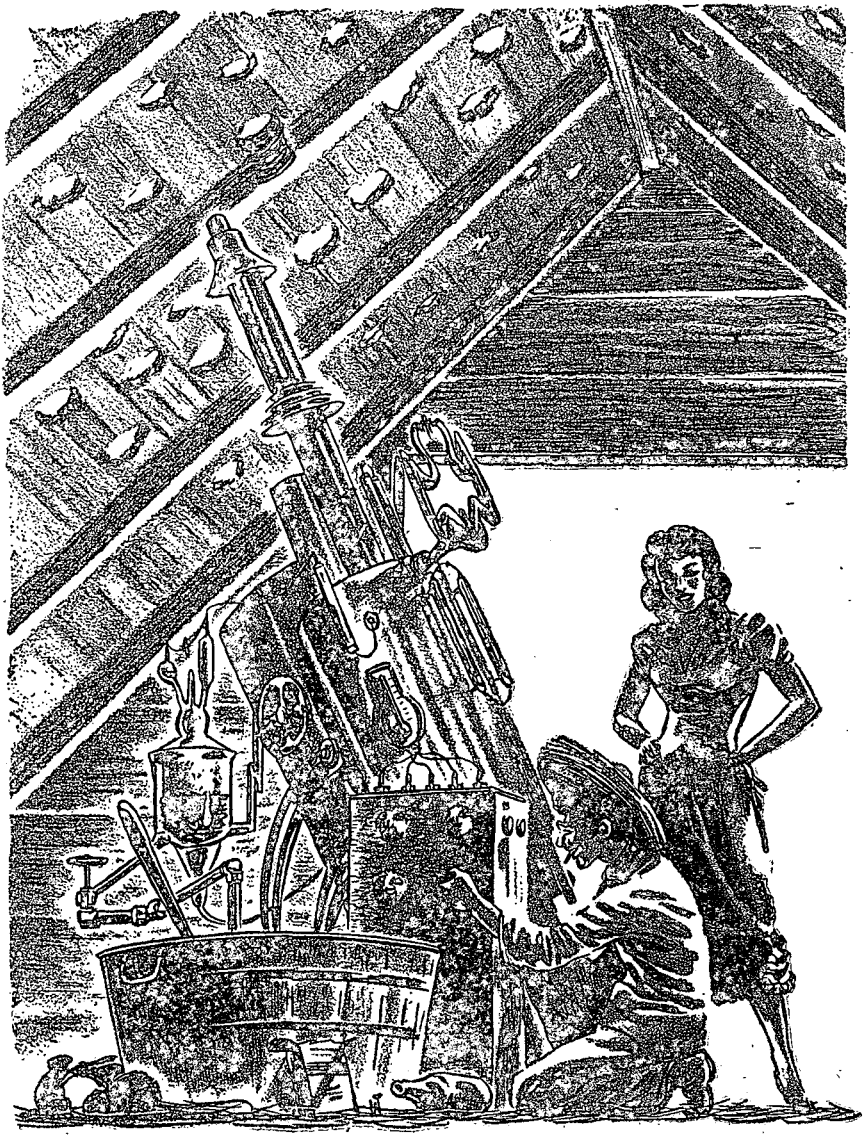

"A pinch of baking powder, a dash of tequilla," said Enrico, "and presto, we make with the fission. . . . But wait, now comes the Americano mail plane! Now I will show you who is the master of those filthy gringoes!"

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shuts off again the power.

He gets a crowbar; sweating, he hitches the machine back to the center of the loft.

Now he runs to the arch in the wall and looks out.

"*Hola,* Conchita," he mutters, "are you reciting the poems to Rosita the cook—or what?"

If this young man had been the founder of the hacienda, the great-grandfather Macartney, he who invented the machine and then disguised it with tallow and hid it away from politicos in the pigeon loft—that man, when impatient, would have stuck his head out and let out a yell.

But this was Enrico Macartney y Novarro y Gonzales Rosario, nearly pure Latin, unable to let go of his personal dignity.

So he fretted and stood from one foot to the other, while sunset colors from the western sky painted the back of his head. On the roof of the main kitchen, at length, several pigeons rose and fluttered. Enrico raised his eyebrows.

"What is now with Rosita the cook?"

Then Enrico's little sister, Conchita, danced out of the kitchen door, waving to him a small paper bag. She ran across the growing shadows of the courtyard.

Enrico smiled, relaxed, reached halfway down the inside ladder to give her a hand up.

"Rosita the cook is getting stiff about all the baking powder," Conchita warned him.

"Women!" he snorted. "What do they understand? Pass me the baking powder, *por favor,* and watch this."

Into the depths of a brass cone he measured a meticulous gram of the white powder. He uncorked a bottle of clear liquid and the hilarious odor of *tequila* rose in the warm air. A little of this *tequila* went into a special receptacle at one side.

"You are fortunate to behold this," he told Conchita, with excusable pomp. "This is atomic fission."

Having no idea what he was talking about, Conchita was, as always, impressed. She nodded emphatically.

"Our country is saved."

Conchita agreed to this too. Enrico should know.

"It is a great secret," he added.

A secret, that Conchita could understand. "Oh *si,* Enrico."

"Now those stupid and heartless *gringoes* who think they have the world by the throat, who think they know all about atomic fission, who think we are blind, hah!—where was I? Ah. They suppose that to be fissionable, an element must be, as they call it, unstable. Pah! All *gringoes* are fools!"

Conchita looked disturbed.

"Enrico," she protested, remember the great-grandfather. For his sake we refer to *gringoes* as *norte-americanos,* simply."

Offended, Enrico turned his back and fussed at his machine. "Very well, then, all *norte-americanos* are simple in what they call their knowledge. Does that sound better?" He had to keep on talking about it; he turned back to her, tapping one finger.

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"See. I explain it to you again. First, there is time, the primarily unstable element. Is that clear?"

"Oh *si*, Enrico." In her mind were images of time and clocks, horses and stables, all reasonably clear.

"Very well." He cleared his throat. "*Pues*, this machine turns very fast. Not as fast as time, *es verdad*. That will not come until I get a bigger machine. But very fast; and to this speed we add the speed of chemical transformation, when solid and liquid matters pass into gas, which is also a point of instability. You follow me?"

But certainly. Conchita was listening carefully to every word. These words did not go together yet to make any sense that she could understand, but she was following, all right.

"This I can prove with the figures which I got out of a magazine. I can also prove by what happens. Aha! Look out there!"

The evening mail plane had come in sight with a rumor of sound and a twinkle of outer light, tiny as a silver minnow against the flames of sunset.

"Just in time we are ready," he crowed. "Ah, ha. Sleep in the air, fat-bottomed *gr* — *norte-americanos. You are doomed!*"

Conchita wriggled happily. "This time you will blow the plane all to little flinders, no?"

"It shall become a puff of fire and dust."

Earnestly he juggled levers, bringing nearer to each other the white solid substance—obtained from Rosita the cook—and the clear liquid substance—obtained by secret means—for the certain point at which, combining to form a gas, they would be caught up by the speed of the machine.

Nearer droned the plane; faster and faster spun the wheels of Enrico's machine, flashing as they turned, until the log beams of the loft shuddered premonitory rumblings.

"Do you think of me up there?" whispered Enrico, "Hah. You shall learn a thing."

Calm, ignoring him indeed, the plane thrust on through the sky, nearer—nearly overhead—now—

"Enrico Macartney y Novorro y Gonzales Rosario!" he shrieked, and brought down the master-lever.

A blue streak of fire leaped through the roof and up out of sight in one dizzying flash.

A clean miss.

Undisturbed, the plane snored on. Either they had not seen the blue streak that had shot at them, or else, having seen it, they had not believed it.

Enrico lifted his right fist as high as he could reach, quivering with frustration. He went on tiptoe. Bending with a great sweep, he beat on the still rumbling floor.

"Missed," he howled, "again I have missed!"

Conchita was disappointed also. Tears rose in her big dark eyes.

"But your aim, it is perfect with the *pistola*, my brother," she grieved. "How can you miss? Doubtless the thunderbolt falls short. Perhaps there was not enough baking powder that I

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bring you?"

Enrico straightened and cocked an eye aloft.

"It is hard to tell," he admitted. "It goes too fast to watch. But something is wrong here with the machine. There is much that I do not yet know about it."

Around the new hole in the roof was a ring of glowing metal that had appeared when the blue shot through. He watched while a drip of molten metal cooled and fell, while the heat glow died out of the metal and darkness gathered in the loft.

He rolled the nugget under his foot and kicked it aside.

"There is much that I do not yet know. But this is clear: If I am to get at yonder fat-bottomed *gringoes,* I must have a bigger machine, a heavier foundation, more study and practice."

Conchita was fascinated.

"A still bigger machine, *si*—where will you get this bigger machine, Enrico?"

It was then that Enrico made his great decision.

"Enrico shall no longer work alone —" he waved an arm. "The secret shall be shared with the whole family. Also shall be shared the glory and the expense."

Conchita bounced her dark curls, nodding. "Comes the *corrida* next week—then comes everybody."

"Among the entire clan Macartney, what may not be accomplished?"

The great roundup—yes, those who could accomplish so great an affair as the Macartney *corrida,* those same ones might well be able to accomplish anything.

From everywhere come the cows, the bulls, the steers, the new calves, all crowding into the home pastures. There is counting and branding. There is cutting out of cattle to be sold. There is much emulation in deeds among the *vaqueros,* and everywhere appear more and more neighbors and cousins—and at the hacienda Macartney all the neighbors are also cousins—for big barbecues and big stories.

First to arrive, in the early hours of the excitement, was fat Uncle Jaime, pulling up his wide belt on his sagging stomach, and slapping the dust off his pants with flaps of his hat. It had been work to climb the loft ladder, and Uncle Jaime was full of doubt.

"Let us see what you have there, boy." Uncle Jaime leaned over the machine, turned a machine with his left hand, pinched a finger and withdrew rather stiffly. "Does it do something?"

Carefully, Enrico measured out the baking powder and *tequila.* He explained how they were to be fissioned by speed at the point of chemical conversion.

"Nonsense," declared Uncle Jaime. He sniffed the cork of the *tequila* bottle, looked impressed, and took down a good swig.

While he was doing this, Enrico, being ready, put the machine into action. Blue fire spat through the roof and went howling aloft, leaving a hot new metal-ringed hole punched into the wood of the roof.

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Uncle Jaime's mouth fell open. He looked from the *tequila* bottle shattered at his feet to the transmuted roof.

"That is the first time in my life," he declared in awe, "that I ever let go of a full *tequila* bottle."

He picked up a nugget from the floor. "And you say, *nino,* that these bits of brass on the floor are the same as that metal that is—you say that metal is made from the wood by the passage of your thunderbolt?"

Enrico averred that this was so.

Uncle Jaime buffed the nugget on his sleeve, rolled it between thumb and forefinger, set it between his two good front teeth and bit down hard. Then he took it out of his mouth and watched the dampness dry out of the marks of his teeth.

"It is a soft kind of brass," Enrico admitted, "not good for machine parts. But on the other hand it does not rust, which is a good thing for something, no?"

"Si," agreed Uncle Jaime thoughtfully. He put the nugget into his pocket. "I will get you another bottle of *tequila,* and you shall make more of this stuff with your thunderbolts.

Thin Uncle Gilberto, the poet of the family, was much less practical and much more openly enthusiastic.

"It's the fire of inspiration, boy," he cried, weeping for joy and pride. "See if you can knock a chip out of that red flower, the great volcano yonder."

Enrico juggled his equipment, raised and lowered his cones for a bit, and then sent a blue bolt screaming across the valley.

Naturally, this surprised the cows. All the cattle looked up and muttered undecisively; but you understand how it is with a cow. She is slow—whereas the blue bolt of Enrico was very fast. The cows did not think, "Do we like this?" nor even, "What is it?" They only thought, "Did something go past?" Then they decided, "Apparently not," and went to grazing again.

Meanwhile the cone of the volcano was crumbling.

"Dios," whispered Uncle Gilberto, "the monster has been struck to the heart."

In fell the sides of the cone, caving, tumbling, until half the bulk of the mountain was gone, and even its fires were choked.

Uncle Gilberto stood back with one hand on his forehead. Then he embraced Enrico in silence.

"I must make a poem upon this occasion," he whispered at last. "But where shall I find the words? Perhaps in the dictionary —"

But the biggest excitement came when Uncle Huberto, the assayer, arrived and announced that the new metal which Enrico's thunderbolts made of the wooden roof was, in fact, pure soft gold.

Gold!

By the last day of the *corrida,* the loft was milling full of uncles and cousins, all full of enthusiasm and all explaining the matter loudly to each other.

They were full of plans. Enrico, having practiced all week and improved his aim, was to have one crack

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at the mail plane. If it connected, the clan Macartney felt that the shot would be heard around the world, whose center would automatically become what it always ought to have been, namely the Hacienda Macartney.

"We can command armies and generals."

"We can lay flat the capitals of the world."

"We can make peons of all who oppose us."

"Down with our ancient enemies!"

"Down with all foreigners!"

Each dreamed his own dreams.

Uncle Jaime saw himself in a black and silver uniform, riding a black stallion down a street lined with equestrian statues of himself. Military bands played on each street corner, and people made obeisance by falling flat on their faces like waves of wind blown grass.

Uncle Gilberto saw the smoke of blasted cities, smelled the ashes of ruins, heard children screaming with fear and pain; and he wept with pity and admiration.

Practical Uncle Huberto planned for himself a beautiful garden pavilion having porphyry pillars, roofs of gold lace, and staffed with one *senorita* from every country in the world.

Last to arrive, the grandfather, immense in years and in dignity, was hoisted in his chair to the loft.

A silence grew, letting in the smells of cattle and dust, the sounds of restless cows bedding down for the evening, and the patiently riding *vaqueros* keeping calm the minds of the cows.

All had been said; the clan was agreed; the mail plane was due—and doomed—in fifteen minutes.

One irrevocable gesture—and Enrico would be embarked, by his clansmen, upon the building of more and bigger machines, more and hotter thunderbolts.

With all eyes upon him, Enrico took up his materials. He looked into his paper bag; he uttered a cry. Anxiety appeared on every face.

"What is wrong, *muchacho?*"

"The paper bag—it has become damp from the dews which have entered through the holes in the roof. The baking powder has been destroyed of its efficacy."

Everybody laughed.

"Is that all? Where is Conchita? Go, *nina,* tell Rosita the cook—more baking powder, please."

Conchita spread her hands.

"Rosita the cook has a will of her own. Last time, she said, 'No more baking-powder!' "

It was a crisis. General consultation resulted in deadlock, for whereas some were in favor of descent upon the kitchen with force and arms, others resisted this idea as disorderly and unchivalrous—yet nobody was willing to postpone the experiment.

It was poetic Uncle Gilberto who suggested compromise. "I could write a poem to soften the heart of Rosita the cook, and sign to it the name of Enrico—eh?"

But of course Enrico had to protest this.

"Honor demands that one speak for oneself," he cried in despair. "Give me the paper, somebody. I have

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never written the poems, but if I must, I will try."

It is wonderful what can be accomplished when one is desperate enough. With seconds ticking away, Enrico writhed and wrote. Over his shoulder, Conchita read aloud.

Ah, Senora, would I were a dove.
I would die of joy at your feet,
Sure of apotheosis is arroz con pollo.
Would I were a fish or a duck
Or anything that you beatify with your art;
Death in such a cause were worthy;
But here I die of frustration
Without any baking-powder.
Ah, Senora, can one so fair be without mercy?

There was a chorus of approval and Conchita sprinted for the main kitchen, carrying the paper.

But already their victim, the mail plane, was visible as a glimmer upon the horizon.

Hands reached down the ladder to meet Conchita on her return. They seized the little paper bag that she held aloft. They passed it from one to another through the gathering redness of dusk.

"Rosita the cook says," Conchita reported faithfully, "that the poem is inspiring but there is no more baking-powder in very truth, and will baking soda do instead?"

Against the rising rumble of the machine and the grumble of the oncoming plane, this report was also passed from one to another, spilling here and there a little.

"Senora the cook says the poem is beautiful—and hurry, lest the *gringo* plane escape us again."

"*Senora* the cook says to hurry."

"*Pues,* boy, for what are we waiting?"

With a shaking hand, Enrico measured out his white powder and his clear liquid. With a voice suddenly firm, he cried, "Death to all strangers!" as he came down on the master lever with all his force.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The machine heaved up on one side, leaned away from the group with ponderous grace, and with shriekings and rendings of metal it spewed wheels, levers, and balls of green fire the size of armadilloes out across the darkening skies, out across the thronged pastures of the *corrida.*

A cow is not fast on the uptake—but this was a thing that no cow could miss.

Bawling and bellowing rose up over the curses and prayers of the *vaqueros.* There was a vast rush of departure.

When the thunder of hoofs and of bellowing died away at last, every creature — even the pigeons — had stampeded to far parts, and all was dark.

Finally the grandfather spoke. He was old, he had many words, he spoke enough for all. His chair was lowered away. All the men followed, leaving Enrico to weep in sorry privacy over the ruin of his once beloved machine—and leaving also Conchita, who had fallen off the ladder at the first explosion, and who had not yet

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come to.

Next morning a small family committee met and settled the whole thing out of hand.

The fault, of course, was entirely Enrico's. Young people, wild ideas—what would you?

They itemized the damage done: the lost half of the mustache of handsome Uncle Pedro, who had been leaning too far forward; the sprained limb of Conchita, who was in bed crying; the splintering of sundry fences and outbuildings by flying wheels and machine parts; the distress of the cows and the general collapse of the *corrida.*

"Big ideas are all very well for talk," declared the grandfather, "but it is from the cows that we live. In thirty days," he tapped with his cane on the tile floor, "in thirty days our *vaqueros* will hardly round up again our scattered cattle."

"Thirty days, *por Dios,*" rumbled fat Uncle Jaime, "first we need thirty days to round up our scattered *vaqueros.*"

What could Enrico say? For all he could ever know, it had been his machine, his theory, that had been inconsistent and dangerous. He could only look at the floor and grieve in his heart.

He had to agree with the grandfather's final decision.

"Let him go to the college of the good fathers at Santo Rosario, and let him learn there a little good sense."

So in the end it came out very well. Enrico is learning to become quite a poet at Santo Rosario. He may yet exceed the works of poetic Uncle Gilberto; and the good fathers at the college indulge him also by allowing him all the care of their temperamental artesian well as an extracurricular sport.

In time, all will be forgotten.

So if you should go as a passenger one day in the mail plane that passes at evening over the Hacienda Macartney, and if you should see glowing in the red light of sunset a pigeon loft roofed with solid gold lace—do not tremble. Sit back.

It is not from that direction that disaster is coming.

THE END

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

Rog Phillips—ah, there's a yarn! This one does Rog proud. We present here an "idea." Ideas are rare, that is, new ones, in science fiction. Here's a *new* idea. It is the simple premise that human judges are not infallible, but a robot brain would deliver jurisprudence strictly according to the letter of the law. There could be no bribery, no swaying of the jury by eloquence, no abstruse interpretations of the wording of the law—only hard, solid justice that would be 100% logical.

In the next story, we ask you to remember Shaver's "An Adam from

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the Sixth," which occupies a niche in the minds of most fans as a story of classic calibre. Also, it was not a pulp story, but strictly "slick." Now we present another story from Mr. Shaver called "Lady" which we think falls into this category. We still like "An Adam from the Sixth" better, but this one reminds us that Shaver *can* write. We offer this as proof of that statement, and as an indication that we intend to establish beyond all doubt that he is a fine writer, even without his mystery. We suggest that you read this with a critical eye.

"The Gamin" is a direct steal out of *Thrilling Wonder*. We've read many fine stories of this type in that magazine, and we think this one is quite in line with those stories. Somehow it reminds us of the work of Eando Binder back in the old days.

Lastly we have a story written just for stfans! In it, you'll find many people you know, and you'll find a fictional account of goings on at the Convention that actually did not go on, but we think you'll get a kick out of them. Better, we think you'll like the idea of giving a fan artist a chance to illustrate it. Jack Gaughan did this one, and we think he did a good job. The two persons illustrated are Bea Mahaffey and Charlie Tanner. We like to know if you readers like us to be this personal and chummy with you.

Incidentally, speaking of Bea Mahaffey, we caught sight of her at the Convention, and decided she would be a valuable addition to our staff, so we induced her to come up to Evanston and take part in helping put together OTHER WORLDS. She really knows science fiction, and she'll add her talents to ours. So, now we have a stfan assistant. Which will show you how far we'll go to make sure we know what we're doing.

Our cover this month is a combination of *Astounding's* astronomical covers and Paul's *Amazing* covers, and we think you'll like it. Malcolm Smith painted it and did a nice job. Incidentally, the idea for it came from Rog Phillips, and it illustrates Craig Browning's yarn in this issue. Beg your pardon, Rog, for taking up your idea like that!

Bill Terry, who does a good share of the illustrating this issue, is showing marvelous ability in this field. He's really new to it, but his grasp of science fiction is quite remarkable, considering he never read a science fiction story until he illustrated "Survival" by Henry Hasse.

Lester Del Rey is coming to town this month to see Howard Browne concerning *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, and, of course, to see us. We are told he'll see Browne first, which is fine. That gives us a chance to better Browne's offer, whatever it is. We have piracy in mind.

We just paid a visit to our old haunts, and we've discovered that Howard Browne is buying stories by such authors as L. Sprague De Camp, Lester Del Rey, Theodore Sturgeon, L. Ron Hubbard, and so on. It looks like good old Howard is winding up the Juggernaut to provide us with overwhelming competition. Go ahead,

(Concluded on page 107)

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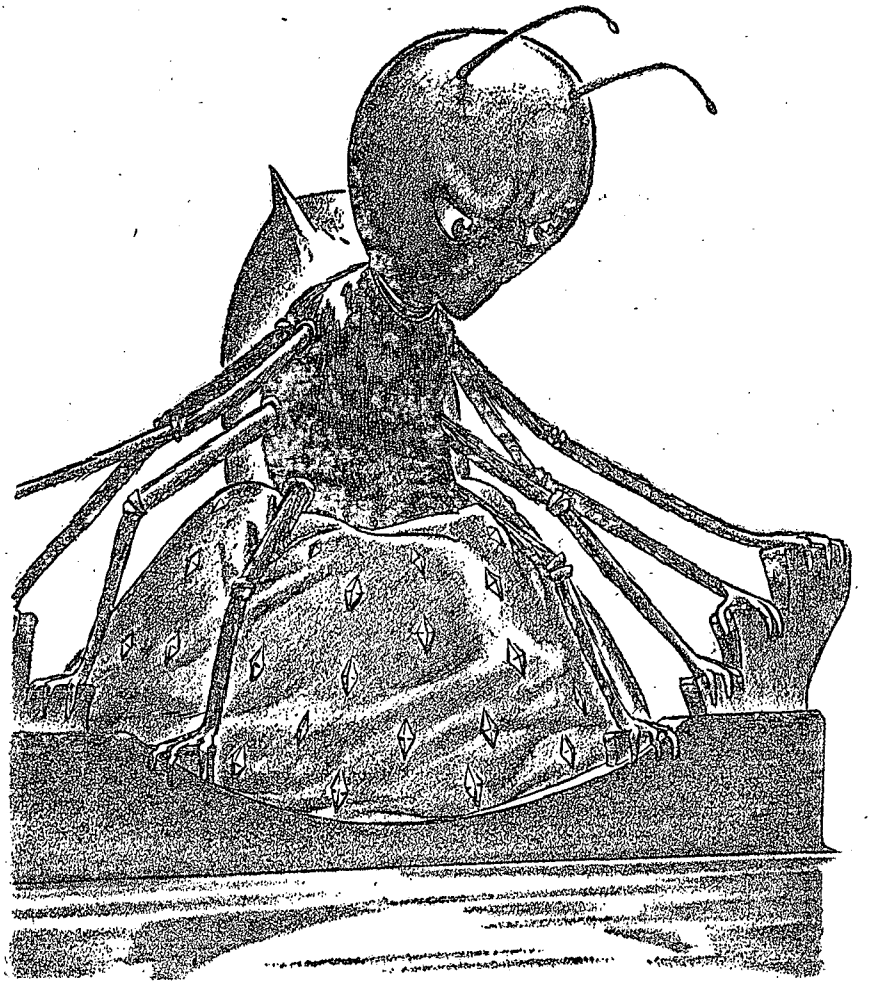

IT WAS pretty much of a mess, all right (especially with Ruth bordering on hysteria). That would not do! Clint Anders glanced at the dark-haired girl huddled beside him in the strange-powered Martian vehicle.

"Steady," he whispered, "steady! I sense no hostility from these creatures. Naturally they're curious!"

"But where are they taking us? Clint, I—I'm frightened. I wish I had died in the crash with the others!"

"Don't talk like that, darling. We'll pull out of this."

Clint regretted leaving the wrecked *Terra,* but there was no choice. These

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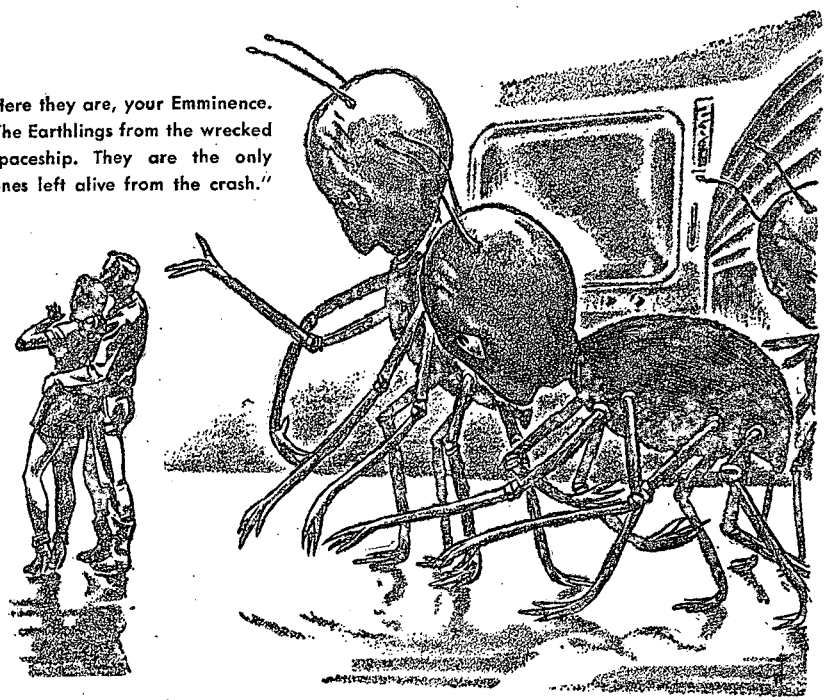
SURVIVAL

By HENRY HASSE

"There is no stronger urge," the ruler of Mars said. "This puny thing you call love cannot stand against it. I will put you to a test—and your lives will depend on it!"



"Here they are, your Emminence. The Earthlings from the wrecked spaceship. They are the only ones left alive from the crash."

creatures had come upon them instantly from out of the Martian magnetic storm; almost as if they were *waiting* there for the crash. Clint wondered about that, and during the long trip across the desert he turned his professional attention to them. They were, beyond doubt, *arachnid*—eight-limbed, with furry gold-tinged bodies and bulbous heads. Huge faceted eyes glittered blackly. They carried no weapons, but there was a quiet aura of insistence about the way they herded the two Earth people into the long tubular conveyance. All attempts at communication had failed, and Clint had the feeling that they were disdainful of his efforts.

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He glanced back across the endless ochre desert. The *Terra* lay out there . . . and the bodies of Commander Clark, Chief Technician Mowbray, the half-dozen other members of E-M Expedition I. Mowbray had died near the grav stabilizers, working frantically to the end. The fury of the magnetic storm was something new to their experience. Clint and Ruth alone had been stationed at the rear rocket control, and reached the crash nets barely in time . . .

Now a pang of regret and irreparable loss seized Clint. He turned back to Ruth, gripped her hand. "I think we'll be all right. These Martians seem intelligent. They may help us, after we manage to communicate . . ."

The sled-like vehicle was slowing. They topped a gradual rise, and suddenly a city appeared below, with bizarre conical structures reaching multi-hued across the sands. Minutes later they were speeding in what seemed to be an underground monorail. There came a sighing as the car stopped against a cushion of air. Doors slid back. Their captors motioned them out.

Their breath was taken away by the splendor of the room they entered. Walls of soft rose-marble reached high into a silvery filigreed dome. Under the radiation of a pale orange glow, the immense floor gleamed like quicksilver. In the center was a dais, topped by a shimmering cushioned throne, topped in turn by a brooding figure of black and gold—twice the size of these other creatures, twice as bulbous, twice as awesome.

The figure moved, leaned forward. Quite suddenly then a thought, a single thought only, engulfed the room with a tremendous potentiality:

"I am Dhaarj!"

With a shudder, Ruth turned her eyes away.

"Careful!" Clint placed his arm about her. He hadn't quite grasped the thought this creature was trying to convey, but he felt the overtones across his mind, he sensed the power. They had come here to study life on Mars, but now Clint had a feeling that life was studying them!

Dhaarj, High Lord and Most Supreme Effulgence of all Mars, was indeed studying them. He sat imperiously upon his throne. His eight spider-like limbs rested upon eight individual cushions. His immense head bowed downward while a pair of eyes, cold and black as the depths of space, stared at these two strangers brought to him from out of the desert. The twin antennae atop his head vibrated rapidly.

"I think he's trying to communicate!" Clint whispered.

Dhaarj was indeed trying to communicate. His limbs curled and uncurled with the effort to penetrate the minds of these alien two. He sent a message with enough force to broadcast a command to his entire planet! But it was soon apparent to Dhaarj that the stupid creatures could not understand. He gave it up for the moment, and glanced at his attending scientists. Already Dhaarj's prodigious mind had been recipient of all known facts concerning the approach

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of the alien spaceship! For days his astronomers had charted it with incredible exactness. But try as they might, there had been no way to prevent the crash. Now he waved an impatient appendage.

"Did you," he telepathed, "carry out my orders? Have you extracted the thought-patterns from the brains of those who died in the ship?"

He had unconsciously raised his thought-power to the fourth magnitude. The Head Scientist, startled, bowed until his antennae scraped the floor. "Oh, yes, your Eminence! Yes! We followed your esteemed instructions. Needless to say, the results were most gratifying!"

"*I* shall be judge of that. Well, what are you waiting for? Transmit these results to me!"

With a show of nervousness, the scientists moved closer together to form an interlinking unit. Their combined mental flow began transmitting to Dhaarj all that they had extracted from the brains of the dead Earthmen. All that each Earthman possessed as the sum and total of his mind, now entered the vast reservoir of Dhaarj's brain . . .

Clint leaned forward tensely, watching the tableau. He tried to grasp some inkling of the mental flow, but only the faintest of overtones washed across his brain and were gone. There was a feeling of foreboding. He never once removed his gaze from the huge *arachnid* life-form, Dhaarj.

And when his scientists had finished, Dhaarj sat unmoving and baffled. He glanced at the two Earthians below him. Here were intelligent beings, beyond the faintest shadow of doubt. But their mental patterns! To Dhaarj those patterns were baffling, unreasonable, utterly incongruous.

"An element has been lost," he vibrated to his scientists, now standing a safe distance from the deadly glory of his throne. "All these Earthmen could not have been mad. Yet, while logic is known to them, they seem to have disregarded it. Where rudimentary patterns of thought dictate one course of action, they incomprehensibly have followed another!" He glared at his Head Scientist. "Are you sure you did not bungle the thought-patterns in extracting them?"

"Your Illimitableness!" The Head Scientist kow-towed so that his eight limbs sprawled in all directions. "The extraction of the cerebrothalamic coordinates from the static brains was performed without flaw, and the results recorded automatically on the trans-telector! Nothing could have been lost, of that we are certain. Perhaps—if I may be so bold, your Magnificence—perhaps these beings belong to a defective life-development unable to coördinate pure reason!"

Something like a smile altered the delicate features of Dhaarj, as he glanced again at Clint and Ruth. "I think differently," he telepathed flatly. "These Earth people had enough of science and reason to build a vessel to bridge interplanetary space. Something," he emphasized, "which even you and your entire staff have failed to achieve!"

"But only because we lack the

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necessary metals, your Effulgence," came the worried reply. "Otherwise, with our formulae and multi-world equations we could—"

"Don't interrupt!" Dhaarj thundered mentally, committing that offense himself. "I repeat, something has been lost. Or perhaps these beings include within their alchemy something we have never known. But I shall find it out! I shall find this missing pattern, even if I have to subject these two to mental integration." His mind raised its potential to the sixth magnitude, indicating that the audience was at an end.

Slowly the scientists withdrew. This was nothing new to them. All the secrets of the universe were a constant challenge to Dhaarj—and now, to add to their scientific labors, had come these strange life-forms from Earth.

"Guard these two well," came Dhaarj's parting shot. "Make a complete study of the space vessel. Repair it. Improve upon it!"

"Yes, your Effulgence," replied the Head Scientist as he backed out of the room.

So it was that Clint and Ruth, puzzled, were taken to other quarters near by. Nothing was lacking for their comfort. True, it was prison, but they did not immediately mind that. The sorrowful remembrance of their dead friends was still with them.

"Clint, why were *we* spared? Why did the others have to die, some of the best scientific minds of Earth, and yet we—" She gave way then, sobbing, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Yes, why?" Clint wondered bitterly. He was only a humble biochemist, and Ruth a student psychologist; their tasks: to correlate in their respective fields whatever life they found on Mars. Well, they had found it!

To pass the time, they wrote voluminously about the Martians. Ruth evolved complete, conclusive theories as to their strange behavior patterns, while Clint guessed at their biochemistry and consigned them to the kingdom of the *arachne* who by some quirk of evolution had become tremendously intelligent creatures.

Meanwhile, in the splendor of his imperial chamber only Dhaarj remained. Bathed in soothing radiations from the ceiling, he sat quite motionless. For hours he pondered. Stream after stream of thought flashed from his astounding mind. Every detail, every iota of the thought-patterns of these dead Earthmen was analyzed with profound care. And in the end Dhaarj knew that what he sought eluded him. He only knew that *something* in the pattern was strange and incomprehensible—and that was challenge enough!

"I must obtain it from the two who are alive," he concluded. "I believe I know, now, why I failed to contact their minds. I shall try again."

He flashed an order. Once more Ruth and Clint were brought into the august presence. Once more Dhaarj peered down from his cushiony throne. "This," he told himself, "is

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beneath my dignity! To think that I should be compelled to reduce my potential to one-sixteenth of one magnitude!"

But he tried it, and this time without trouble an uninterrupted flow of thought bridged the gap of their different evolutions. To the Earthians, it was startling. But Dhaarj allowed them little time for wonderment.

You must tell me what I need to know, he began. *First, why have you come here? From the brains of your companions we have obtained the history of that planet you call Earth. We are aware of the centuries of scientific effort preceding this endeavor. But we fail to understand the REASON behind it all. Your planet is infinitely richer than ours. To us it would be a paradise, yet you wilfully leave it. All this tremendous effort, this expenditure of thought and life-force . . . all for what?*

Dhaarj withdrew a part of his mind, and Clint considered his answer carefully. *In order,* he replied, stumbling with the mental concept, *in order to understand the mysteries and workings of the universe.*

But WHY is it so important for you to understand these things? Dhaarj said, utterly disregarding his own curiosity.

So as to— Here Clint hesitated. *To dispel certain misconceptions about the nature of life and the universe in general. It is only thus, perhaps, that we as individuals can understand the ultimate—*

The ultimate? Dhaarj's thought stabbed like a rapier.

The ultimate meaning of right and wrong, of good and evil—perhaps even of life and death and their meaning.

Good and evil? Dhaarj repeated mentally. Then he seemed to ponder. His next thought appalled Clint. *By that, do you mean efficient and inefficient? Or perhaps logical and illogical?*

No! By good, I mean that which brings the greatest possible benefit to the greatest number; and evil, that which is harmful and negative—such as—as the baser emotions. In trying to explain, Clint floundered. How, he wondered, could he transmit universals like these to such an alien intellect?

Emotions! Dhaarj pounced upon the thought-form. *What are they? I seem not to intuit your mental pattern, Earthman. You are not clear. Send!*

Clint began to realize the task before him. *When I use the term emotions, I mean—feelings, which are part of our race-consciousness, our philosophy of life, our extension of being! Such as—anger, and revenge, and love!* He made a supreme effort with each word, and waited for Dhaarj's reaction. He saw that he had succeeded in conveying the meaning of revenge—which Dhaarj translated as efficiency! And anger—which to Dhaarj was merely the increase of a thought-potential to neutralize an opposing mentality!

But love . . . that was something Dhaarj was unable to comprehend. Consequently, he seized upon it eagerly. A terrific struggle ensued, in which Clint tried to make clear the

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emotion he felt for the slender, gray-eyed girl at his side. Ruth sensed the struggle and joined her mind with his, while Dhaarj probed to the recesses of their minds in an effort to find the meaning of this thing that seemed so all-important to them.

We fail, Earthman, Dhaarj's thought crackled at last. *We must cease. You could not stand my increased potential, and that would be inefficient, as I would defeat my ends with your annihiliation.* He paused. *You believe that this thing you term love is the most powerful force in existence . . .*

It was not so much a question as a statement, and Clint sensed a cunning behind it. But he answered without hesitation.

Yes! Existence may cease and planets may die, and the stream of life take other forms. But for us of Earth, love will always be the greatest force. It is life itself!

Dhaarj frowned down at him. *You are wrong, Earthman.*

Stubbornly, Clint shook his head. He summoned all of his thought-faculty and reiterated his belief. And all around him, dozens of Martians who crowded the chamber caught his vibrations.

You are wrong, Dhaarj contradicted again, coldly this time. His antennae went taut, he seemed to sit a little straighter on his throne. *Survival, Earthman! Survival is the greatest force! It rules all existence.*

The atmosphere was electric, as the Martians sensed this conflict of minds. They were appalled at this puny Earth creature who dared contradict the Dhaarj! Clint felt Ruth's hand tighten in his, as if bidding him to desist. But a well of anger rose in him, and he continued to project mentally what to him was irrefutable truth.

Dhaarj's limbs twitched with impatience on the cushions. *So you persist in the belief that this figment you call love is greater than Survival? You and the slender one whom you guard so well,* he pointed out, *are the only survivors of the crash. I had thought of subjecting you to mental integration in order to ascertain the element that is missing.* His bulbous body leaned forward. *However, I have a better plan. If you can prove by experiment the power of this thing that seems so important to you, I believe you will have shown me what I want to know. If you can do this, you may return to your own planet. I shall see to it!*

Clint felt Ruth go tense with hope. But he sensed an ominous undertone to Dhaarj's thoughts.

By what experiment? Clint sent the question. *How can we prove anything so intangible?*

By MY experiment. I will conduct it! You will know when it begins! Whereupon the interview ended, as Dhaarj's mental defenses rose in magnitude and communication between them ceased.

They were returned to their suite, where they rested from the mental ordeal. Clint's head was throbbing. He felt as though his brain had been wrung dry. They were not disturbed again.

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In the following hours they discussed all that had transpired, speculating as to Dhaarj's trustworthiness should they win the experiment. What form would such an experiment take? And would he really send them back to Earth unharmed? Clint had no doubt that the *Terra* was being repaired and studied at this very moment.

"You should never have antagonized him," Ruth said.

"Think I was going to let him bluff me? Besides, it gave us our chance, our *only* chance. Somehow I think he'll keep his word. We must win!" But Clint was worried now, wondering what Dhaarj was devising in that cunning mind.

As the hours passed, their fears and hopes and myriad emotions were soothed. It happened gradually, so gradually they did not even notice. It was as if a commanding mental force were slowly asserting itself, lulling them to sleep.

Neither of them knew it . . . but already the experiment had begun.

Clint awoke first, bathed in perspiration. He remembered struggling against something that was more than a dream; it was an overwhelming thought that beat inside his brain.

Survival, it seemed to say. *Survival is the greatest force. Survival is the law. Survival is Life.*

He stood up, felt weak. He rubbed a hand across his jaw and was surprised to find a heavy growth of beard. How long had he slept? He was taken suddenly about the middle by a hammering nausea of hunger.

He wakened Ruth, and she looked at him with sudden fright in her eyes as she understood. The experiment had begun.

A moment later one of the Martians appeared. *You are free to go now,* he telepathed. *You will not be interfered with. Your spaceship has been repaired and newly equipped.*

Ruth's joy was unbounded, but Clint frowned, motioned her to silence. He controlled his rising thought as he flashed: *Good. But we are hungry, we have not eaten. If you could arrange it—*

The guard's potential rose, overwhelming him. *You are to go. Now. Or stay if you wish. There will be no food.*

Very well. Please take us to our ship.

The answer came back stark and unemotional. *You do not understand. To us you no longer exist.*

The impact of it hit Clint, then. Alone on an alien world, they were to shift for themselves and find their spaceship if they could! The desert was large, probably fraught with dangers. He could not even remember from which direction they had entered the city!

He flashed an angry thought: *Then give us weapons! At least concede us that!*

Survival, Earthman, came the parting thought as the guard left them. *Survival is the greatest force!*

"So that's his game." Clint turned to Ruth as a gorge of anger rose in him. "The cards are stacked, but we'll win! We'll get back to the *Terra!*"

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They searched the quarters for anything that might serve as a weapon. There was absolutely nothing! Apparently Dhaarj had seen to that. But a gleaming fountain was there, and they paused only to drink their fill before making their way out into the city.

They felt no hostility, and they were not disturbed, but there was a feeling of surveillance everywhere they passed. Strong mental barriers were raised against their thoughts. The entire Martian populace knew of Clint's affront to the Dhaarj and were aware of the test.

To linger here was useless; their only chance lay in finding the *Terra!* At last they reached the edge of the city, and before them lay boundless desert, dark red and undulating. They paused uncertainly, staring around.

It was Clint who hit upon the clue they needed. He pointed to a low-lying range far to the left. "Those mountains! They were to the right of us when we entered the city. That much I remember."

They headed into the unknown wastes. The desert was powder-dry, the going was slow. For a long time they did not speak. Speaking was an effort, and it allowed the drifting red dust to enter the mouth.

It was just mid-day. The sun had begun to bite.

In the imperial chamber, Dhaarj sat watching the drama of these alien two as their movements registered upon a huge telector-screen. In a detached scientific way he was almost contemptuous of them.

"As I thought," he murmured mentally, "they are utilizing the most elementary of behavior-patterns. They will succumb much sooner than I supposed."

How well he remembered, long ago, when one of his caravans had gone unreported for days in that fierce desert waste; and the final scene of savagery that greeted the eyes of the rescuers. Introspectively Dhaarj smiled. "These prattling Earth people. They will tear each other to pieces when they finally encounter food. They will become red in tooth and claw. There is no law but Survival!"

Dhaarj leaned forward, extended his thought-potential. Just now he detected a bit of concern in the male creature's mind. Concern for the female creature. That puzzled Dhaarj . . . and that would not do! He decided to watch yet a while.

Clint was worried for Ruth. She seemed to be bearing up all right, but it was tough going! The crimson haze trickled, burning, into the lungs. The pangs of hunger gnawed, but that soon became as nothing compared to the burning thirst that seized them.

"Rest," Clint said through swollen lips. Ruth sank down gratefully. Clint fixed his gaze on the rising foothills to the left. "We've got to get over there! We might find water. . . ."

"It could be dangerous. Maybe there are—"

"Beasts? Good. That'll mean food!" The fact that he was without weapons had ceased to worry him.

They went on. The night came

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clear and pallid. It brought a measure of relief from the heat, but brought other things as well. Hordes of tiny winged mites, worse than the daytime desert dust. They stung the face and neck and caused a fever in their throats. Turning up the collars of their tunics helped a little.

Soon Deimos appeared, riding high on liquid sapphire. Then Phobos, smaller of Mars' two moons, came in its mad pursuit. Strange night-shadows danced before their eyes and about their heads and seemed to twist their brains awry. Once, very near, came a sound of soft padding feet. They glimpsed a murky animal-shape moving through the shadows.

"Wait here!" With no thought of danger, Clint plunged in the direction of the moving shape. But he was clumsy, and the beast disappeared. "It might have meant food," Clint sobbed, coming back.

It was more than hunger he felt now. Fright settled in his stomach like a nest of clammy serpents. He knew too well that the terrible heat and hunger and thirst of another day would finish them! He lifted his face to the sky, seeking Earth, and the vision of the void smashed against his eyes; the ebon infinity seemed hungry too . . . engulfing him . . .

They moved forward endlessly, and it seemed hours later when there appeared a towering hulk that was not a part of the dancing shadows. They stood at last near the base of a giant tree. Or was it a tree? Vegetable, certainly; a twisted nightmare of monumental size! Bulbous branches were spiked with murderous, glistening thorns.

Clint tore a piece of the bark away, touched it to his tongue. It was bitter—and more. Streaks of fire needled his tongue. Finding a foothold, he managed to reach the lowest limb. He tore away one of the thorns, four feet long and thick as his wrist. Crude—but it would serve as a weapon!

Then he spied great bulbous pods growing just above. He managed to pry one of them away. It came down in a sticky mass of pulp about his head, spilling moist seeds into his neck that burned where they touched. The bulk of it fell to the ground, where Ruth pounced upon it.

"It's poisonous!" Clint called a warning. "I should have known there was nothing edible here." He climbed hastily down, and just in time, over her protesting sobs, he knocked the pod from Ruth's hand.

"That was cruel!" she wept. "You should have let me eat it!"

"You would have died!"

"I want to die!"

"You're not going to die!" A fury rose in Clint. He clutched her shoulders and shook her cruelly. The vision of Dhaarj, pompous and arrogant on his throne, settled across his mind like a patina. "You're not going to die. We're going to win, do you hear? I say it! We're going to win!"

As though in contradiction, an animal snarl burst upon them. Clint had time only to thrust Ruth to the ground, as a vague grayish shape sliced through the shadows. Already it was launching itself in a twenty-

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foot leap.

Clint went down. He had a vision of great wings unfolding, and then a talon ripped his tunic from waist to shoulder. The beast landed beyond him, whirled and came with another rush. Clint thrust awkwardly with the thorn. It ripped harmlessly across a scaly hide. Part of the creature's bulk caught him, sent him sprawling ten feet away.

The thorn was slippery, useless in his hands. Clint realized that now. But he clung to it, backed against the tree where Ruth was huddling. The creature whirled again. Clint saw huge ferral eyes glittering in a semi-reptilian head. Wings arched sinuously along its back.

"Keep down!" Clint yelled at Ruth. Then it was coming at them, half rearing. Clint caught a glimpse of the yellowish underside of the thing's body. He planted the thorn firmly against the tree bole, swung the end up. It caught the beast in mid air, and Clint felt the thorn splinter. Then he was hugging the ground, pulling Ruth away from the thrashing bulk. For several minutes screams rent the air. At last the reptilian creature righted itself and sped into the desert, with the thorn dangling in its neck.

"And there goes our food!" Clint was bitter.

Ruth came wearily to her feet. "You—you would have eaten it?"

"I don't know. You were going to eat *that*," he accused, indicating the poisonous pulp.

"I'm sorry. We'll keep going."

"If we can get up to that higher ground, we'll have a view. We might spot the *Terra!*"

Armed with two more of the giant thorns, they continued. The ground rose higher, barren and rocky. They came upon more of the twisted trees but there was no other growth. Several times the reptilian beasts prowled near, and the two Earth people crouched against rocks with their weapons held in readiness.

"I was wrong," Clint said at last in utter weariness. Look!" The desert stretched below them, but those strange shadows still danced, obscuring the vision. "Must be caused by magnetic currents. We can't stay here, it's getting too dangerous. We wouldn't last the night through!"

They stumbled back to the desert. Their only hope of survival lay in finding the *Terra!* They knew it now, and Dhaarj had known it well. Ruth moved aimlessly, trusting Clint's direction. He put out a hand to help her occasionally when she stumbled, but soon he did not even do that.

Clint himself stumbled and went to his knees and felt too weak to rise. Why struggle further, he thought. They had lost! Without so much as a sigh of despair, he sank down where he was, caressing the cool sand, and let sleep and weariness take him.

In the radiance of his imperial chamber Dhaarj gave a gesture of impatience. These prattling Earth creatures who presumed to speak of Survival! He clicked off the transtelector, sank back upon his cushions, munched upon a delicate fruit, and

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telepathed his servants to come and prepare for his evening ablutions.

Clint's sleep-drugged mind was slow to respond. He was lying face down, he knew that. And he ought to get up. If he didn't get up he would die.

Moaning in protest, he slowly rolled himself over. The sun slapped him hard across the eyes. Dazedly he shook his head, and challenged with every fiber of his being a mental monotone that persisted in his brain:

Survival. Survival is the greatest force . . . hunger is part of Survival . . . hunger and thirst must be appeased. And he knew that once again Dhaarj's probing mental power was at work.

Ruth stirred and looked at him with dazed, red-rimmed eyes. She too had felt the message.

"Don't be frightened," Clint rasped. "It's just the test. Remember? It has to do with Dhaarj and our emotions. We can outlast him!"

"I—I can't think clearly."

It startled him. The girl was far more gone than he had supposed! A vague resentment stirred in him as he pulled himself up and staggered on. He was aware that the girl followed, moaning piteously as if she had expected him to help her. The sun climbed higher, hot and dry. And now the pounding refrain, *survival is greatest,* was gone. It was no longer needed. He was thinking of nothing but survival.

As if from a great distance he heard a voice: "Clint . . . I'm getting awfully weak—" And through blurring eyes he saw the girl collapse.

Leave her there, Earthman. YOU go on. The weak must die, the strong survive. Leave her there, and survive . . .

"Damn you!" Clint cried aloud. It was directed partly at Dhaarj, partly at the girl. He ignored the reiterated command. He crouched, stumbled, forced the girl to her feet and dragged her along despite her moaning protests.

And then it was . . . then . . . that he saw the *Terra!*

Far across the sands the gleaming ship rose, gathered speed, then skimmed away to the left where it settled again out of sight.

Clint stared, babbling incoherently. He gathered his strength and half ran, half stumbled in the direction of the disappearing *Terra.* Then he remembered the girl.

Leave her, Earthman. Leave her, and you can reach the ship!

Clint ignored the mental monotone. Once more he pulled Ruth up, forced her along. An hour later he again sighted the *Terra,* smooth and shimmering below the slope of a far away dune. "We're winning!" he babbled through the delirium that washed his brain. And as he stumbled forward, Ruth a dead weight against him, the spaceship rose once more to skim away in a new direction.

It was then that Clint collapsed. He glared at the girl. He could have made it if it weren't for her! The shred of pity he had felt was gone. Dhaarj was right! If it weren't for this weakling creature at his side—

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He urged her on to greater effort, but now she was beyond all understanding. Almost, Clint was ready to leave her there, to admit that Dhaarj was right, that Survival was greatest, that the weak must perish. Almost! Because out of a great well of stubbornness he still clung to a half-forgotten idea. *They must win! They!*

Weakly, through feverish turmoil, through waves of nausea and a hunger that encompassed the universe, Clint pusued his course.

"It is time," Dhaarj decided then. "The real experiment must begin. What is this figment they call love? We shall see!" he thought grimly.

Do not move the ship again, he flashed the command to his technicians far out in the desert. *Proceed with the final step.* Then he summoned his scientists, that they too might see the final outcome on the imperial trans-telector screen . . .

Clint's mind no longer distinguished between the real and the unreal. Thought of the *Terra,* and Dhaarj, and something called an experiment, were gone as if they had never been. He knew only that for some time he had not moved, and hunger and thirst were coiled snakes within him that twisted and turned and sank sharp fangs into his flesh.

And now a thought was trying to penetrate. It was damnably irritating! It wouldn't let him rest!

Food, the thought said. *Food and drink. You are hungry when you need not be. There is food and drink for the taking. But you must hurry! It is near, very near. You must hurry!*

He rolled over weakly and saw a great gleaming hull scarcely fifty yards away.

Food. You can eat. But you must hurry before the other one—Then he saw the food and drink. It was on the sands just beneath the great hull. A plate of food and a tiny jug of water. He saw, too, why he must hurry.

Some distance ahead was the other one. *The other one!* The woman, trying to reach the precious substance first! A great red mist of rage overwhelmed him.

He crawled, frantically. A gnawing anguish gave him strength. He would not be robbed! The food and water was his! Had it not been promised to him? He felt he was not gaining. The one ahead of him turned her head once and glared at him through red-rimmed eyes, then increased her pace. Something very like a snarl came from his throat. He was superior! He must get there first! *Faster,* he urged himself.

Now he could see the tempting morsels of food, hardly enough for one! He sobbed with longing as he pulled himself forward. With animal cunning he calculated the distance. There was no longer any sound from the female one. He sensed that she was weakening fast . . .

Atop his throne Dhaarj watched with profound interest, huge eyes aglitter, his perceptive faculties vibrant. "Wait," he told himself. "Wait until they reach the food. We shall see *then* what this figment of theirs

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means as compared to Survival!"

He had overtaken the other. He was but a few feet from the tempting food. His lips drew back in a snarl, but the female one gathered her strength for a last desperate lunge. Their hands fumbled, clawing for the food.

The tiny jug of water tumbled, spilling into the dust. A rich brown loaf crumbled and went scattering. The aroma seemed to drive the male one to further madness. There was scarcely food for one! He must kill her first! He fumbled for her throat, found it soft beneath his hands. His fingers curved, tightened.

"Clint . . ." The word was followed by a moan. Again, "Clint . . ." as if that were the only thing she could remember or had ever known.

His hands hesitated. She stirred feebly, and there came another word. "Earth . . ." He felt the vibration of it through his fingers, along every fiber until it crashed upon his consciousness. Some of the madness left his eyes, the fingers loosened and he seemed to feel . . . he seemed to feel . . . something vague and stirring and strange. He became aware that she was trying to sit up, trying to speak other words.

"Clint . . . I tried to remember . . ." That seemed too much for her, and she fell back.

But it was enough. A sort of strength and sanity was returning to him now. He began to sob. He fumbled, found what little water was left and made her drink it, very slowly. Then he fed her, tiny morsels at a time, watching her swallow them with difficulty. Forgotten was his own immense hunger.

"You must eat too!"

But he shook his head stubbornly. "No! It was I who was weak, who forgot. You remembered! You proved the test!" Not until he saw the brightening color of her eyes did he begin to eat—and then very little. He came slowly to his feet, raised face and fists to the Martian sky.

"Not afraid, not afraid!" he cried for the benefit of Dhaarj. "Not afraid of you, or your planet, or your thought-potential! Not afraid of what you can do to us! Not afraid of you and your unemotional kind! For we are complete entities and you are not—and you will never understand!"

Together then, as strength returned, they staggered into the waiting lock of the spaceship.

Dhaarj sat dazed. His eight sprawling limbs were still taut with surprise. A frown wrinkled his immense puzzled forehead, but that was as nothing compared to the wonder in his brilliant black eyes. For a long time Dhaarj sat without moving, and not one of his scientists dared speak.

At last Dhaarj rose slowly, ponderously, from his great opalescent cushion. The others stared. In ten years this was the first time the Dhaarj had been known to rise!

Well, he thundered mentally, *you have seen! What are you waiting for? Go out to that spaceship at once! See that it is properly provisioned and recharted for Earth on robot-control.*

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I promised them that, and they shall have it!

Yes, your Illustriousness! the Head Scientist exclaimed, and sent workers to fulfill the command.

Dhaarj still stood there upon four of his limbs. His antennae were vibrant with amazement. *This thing they call love,* he murmured mentally. *The greatest force—greater even than Survival! I still do not understand!* He surveyed those around him, these greatest scientists of his realm.

Your Effulgence, the Head Scientist began. *If I may be so bold—*

Quiet! Dhaarj thundered in the sixth mental potential. *I know what you are thinking! That now we have space travel. That we can take their secret and use it! Well, we will not—because we have a greater problem . . .*

The Head Scientist winced. He knew what was coming. His eight limbs sprawled ignominiously as he tried to move backward to the door.

Dhaarj balanced himself on four of his limbs, pointed at the other four imperiously. *I give you Love!* he exclaimed. *You will study it, you will experiment, you will reduce it to the essentials! You will analyze its component elements! You will report to me! I command you to study it—yes, for ten thousand years!*

THE END

MYSTERY IN THE SKY

SO YOU think nobody's seeing "things" in the skies any more? Well, listen to this cross-section of recent accounts:

Dave Johnson, aviation editor of the Idaho *Statesman,* went aloft with the deliberate intention of staying up until he saw a flying saucer. Here is his account:

"Three days of aerial search paid off Wednesday when for 45 seconds I watched a circular object dart about in front of a cloud bank. The object was round. It appeared black, although as it maneuvered in front of the clouds, I saw the sun flash from it once. I was flying at 14,000 feet west of Boise. I saw it clearly and distinctly. It was rising sharply and jerkily toward the top of the towering bank of clouds. At that moment it was round in shape. The object was turning so that it presented its edge to me. It then appeared as a straight black line. Then, with its edge still toward me, it shot straight up. When I landed, three men of the Idaho National Guard said they had seen an object performing similar maneuvers in the same area."

Dallas, Texas. A woman at Alvarado saw a bright, moonlike disk in the sky between 5 and 6 P. M. And, Mrs. Ramsey C. Johnson, 929 South Oak Cliff Boulevard saw something large and white, going very fast.

Fort William, Ontario. Residents of Hymers, Ontario, saw a huge streak of fire race through the sky from the southwest. They said it reached a point due west of Hymers, performed a loop, then moved south to disappear over the horizon.

Florida. W. R. Davis and P. L. Moore, Miami Weather Bureau, described an object somewhat smaller than a full moon. It lit up the sky to the northwest and fell vertically, leaving a luminous, weaving trail. The trail was S shaped. The object was also sighted at Cedar Keys, with a tail estimated 50 to 60 miles long. The phenomenon was seen as far north as Brunswick, Georgia.

Salem, Oregon. A dozen persons reported that while they were watching the maneuvers of a number of airplanes they observed a flying saucer en route north. After proceeding north for some distance, it turned around and headed south. It halted twice after making the turn. The observations were made from Fairmount Hill, one of the outstanding residential sections.

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Seattle, Washington. Three mountain climbers were buzzed by a flying saucer that was round, almost transparent and sounded like a buzzsaw. Roge Hamilton, his wife, Patricia, and Dick Hamilton said they sighted the object near Snow Lake on the Snoqualmie Pass. It went so fast none of them had time to take a picture.

John J. O'Neill, NHYT News Service, had his telescope pointed at the moon, when a dark body moved across its face from east to west in about one and one half seconds. It was approximately oval, with an angular dimension of between six and ten seconds of arc, was in sharp focus, and cut a straight, sharply defined path. It was small, but could have been seen by the naked eye. It was obviously a celestial object and not a night-flying bird, dark airplane, or other such terrestrial object. It was obviously moving in space between the earth and the moon. If a satellite of Luna, the high velocity with which it was moving would require that it be very close to the moon. If its distance was only 4000 miles from the Earth, it would be moving with a velocity of 12 miles per second, and would be about 500 feet in diameter.

Louella O. Parsons, famous movie columnist, reported the fantastic story of 900 feet of film taken of the flying saucers in Alaska.

Over a year ago, Mikel Conrad was in Alaska filming "Arctic Manhunt" when he heard from the Eskimos of strange flying disks. He made a trip into the Frozen North to see for himself. Then he reported to Washington. The government sent a man to Alaska and asked Conrad for the film he had taken. He turned it over to them. After examination, it was placed in a sealed vault in Los Angeles. Now the film has been released to Conrad, who is incorporating it into a film called "Flying Saucer." Howard Irving Young is writing the film. Conrad is a producer and director for Colonial Pictures.

Boston. Farmer Joseph E. Panek, of South Sedick Road doesn't believe a thing unless he sees it. He, his wife Clara, and a neighbor, Michael P. Bednasz were putting corn in a silo. Panek looked up and saw an object, round like a ball or a saucer, traveling very fast, maybe 1000 miles per hour, from west to east. It was light and silvery-looking and left no smoke or noise. Both his wife and neighbor saw it when he shouted.

Milford, Ohio. 6,000 to 7,000 saw a flying saucer during the St. Gertrude festival at Madeira. Sgt. Berger, operating a searchlight owned by the St. Peter and Paul Church at Norwood caught the disk in his beam. The saucer immediately moved up out of sight. Berger caught it again, two hours later, and this time it did not try to move up. It was under continuous observation for two and one half hours more. Berger estimates it was at an elevation of seven or eight miles. It was apparently 100 to 150 feet in diameter. It seemed to be made of aluminum or some shiny material. The longer the light remained on the disk, the greater the intensity of its glow became. Berger experimented—he moved the light, and the disk remained visible, glowing brightly. Then it moved back into the beam of its own accord. A Milford family drove over, informed Berger that from their viewpoint the disk seemed to be two globes, one above the other. Looking straight up, reported Berger, was like looking at the bottom of a plate.

Temagami, Ontario. A jagged, sustained flash of blinding light that lasted for several minutes was seen moving between Timmins and Temagami. It was a tremendous bluish-white flash, and the illumination remained in the heavens for between 6 and 7 minutes. It was not the aurora borealis.

Osborne, Kansas. Delmar Remick, looked up when he heard geese honking. He saw a flying saucer in the air about a mile up, heading northwest. It remained in view 6 or 7 seconds, moved at terrific speed. Its only other motion was a sort of little flip about every half-second.

There are hundreds more such reports, from every area. They cannot be denied. There is something going on in the sky which is beyond the knowledge of our scientists. The fact remains, there are "flying saucers" and they perform with incredible ability.

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LADY

By RICHARD S. SHAVER

Only dead men sat at the festive board of the spaceship. But at its controls, bringing to Earth an aura of mystery, terror and loneliness, was . . . the lady.

AGAINST the fantastically-woven gold embroidery of black space moved an ebon shape, blotting out the bright counterpoint of the stars. Upon the shape one round window showed dim light. Framed by the ancient, pitted metal of the port, a lonely face peered out, as it had peered for so many lotus-petal's fall upon the dark waters of the past.

It was a lovely face, still youthful, with a tragic beauty that bore the marks of strain, loneliness, despair and betrayal. Too, there was a terrible hunger for her own kind. On her face now was the faintest wisp of hope, for the rings of Saturn with her

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ten circling moons were moving gradually into the path ahead.

The dim, ruddy light of Saturn shown through the dark ports upon incongruous gayety depicted in ancient golden friezes on the walls. Lewd golden nymphs, tall slim shapes of modeled trees, gemmed flowers and graceful sprays of leaf made up the decorations. The light shown now upon a long banquet board around which sat a score of dead men, the rags and tatters of flesh and cloth still clinging with a mockery of life to their white bones. A nude white statue of pallid marble smiled down upon the board from a rose-gold pedestal, a smile terrible to see, like

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Niobe gone mad above the dead bodies of her children.

On went the spaceship, past Saturn, past Mars, past Earth turning green into the sunlight. Then Heirae's eyes, greeting Earth out of the port, noted some resemblance to her own world with a nostalgic delight.

The great ship circled with Heirae's hands on the controls, plunging down at last to seek human-kind, her kind. Down into the darkness of the night side she guided the ship, a graceful shape flickering across the gold-pointed black . . .

Ching O'Neil was thirty, plump and well favored by nature, with a clipped black mustache, a Rubens coloring to his cheeks, a quick, pleasant, business-like air. He was as out of place in these Canadian back woods as *hors-d'oeuvres* with spaghetti. But he was enjoying the spaghetti. It was one thing the old hag, Mrs. Brown, whom he had hired in Eau Pleine to take care of the lodge and cook his meals, could make without special instructions.

Ching had thrown open the south windows, all two of them, to get some light on his canvas. There weren't any windows in the north. He had just finished placing two large blank canvases as reflectors to get some diffusion, when he was turned about by the quick motion of a shadow across the room. The morning light had been blocked by something. Framed by the rustic log window, Heirae's still lovely but ravaged face looked at him, the awful expanse of experienced loneliness staring from her beautiful eyes, the terrible hunger for human-kind twisting her graceful mouth. The sun glistened on the gemmed filagree of gold that held her midnight hair, the sheer soft stuff of the strangely cut gown of blood red . . .

Ching stood entranced. She was an utterly strange vision and he was sure he was being inspired by some ethereal creature who wasn't really there.

Heirae threw one long graceful leg over the sill and came in, landing light as thistledown. Gravity here was as a nothing to her.

Ching began to sketch rapidly as she moved about the room, picking up this object, that book, laying them down with little exclamations of disgust as they proved unreadable or enigmatic of use to her understanding.

There came a battering upon the door with a heavy fist, haste imperative for an opening. Heirae looked up from the Montgomery Ward catalog with curious hungry expectancy. Ching held his palms over his hearing, resolved not to let anything interfere with this angel's visitation. Heirae rose, moved to the door with long unnatural steps, swung it open, and stood aside as Harry French strode in. His red coat and black harness and hollister told Ching he was having a visit from the police.

"So you're the artist who rented the Mory place! I wanted to meet you. Haven't time to talk now, though. There's a big flying craft of some kind down just over the ridge!"

"A wreck!" exclaimed Ching, laying down his soft lead pencils, still

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reluctant to let anything distract him from the providential model. Then he picked up his brushes, began to get ready to paint as the officer talked.

"Not wrecked, landed." Harry French was having a hard time keeping his eyes off the theatrically garbed "model." Thinking she was an acquaintance of the artist's he tried his best not to look too closely through the diaphanous material floating about her other-world figure, a figure of subtle difference from the ordinary human figure.

"She's not anything I ever heard of before . . ." muttered Harry, his face pointing at Ching, but his eyes upon Heirae.

"The model, or the ship?" asked Ching, wondering which he did mean.

"The ship, of course. Must be one of the flying disks, and I've got to get in to Eau Pleine and telegraph the military. We've standing orders to give everything of the kind first place."

Ching chuckled absently. "They really think there are such things as flying disks? Seems silly, to me."

"Never mind what seems silly to you. I want you to do your duty, and lay down that paint brush and forget this model and get over there and keep your eyes on that ship till I get back! Don't let anything happen there without a witness. Don't leave it or go to sleep, or anything else till I get back! Understand, that's orders, and you're appointed my deputy, and you better do as you're told."

Ching nodded his head, still reluctantly. This meant giving up the best opportunity he'd had in years to paint something he wanted to paint! Damn, anyway.

Heirae looked at the red-coat with peculiar, embarrassing intensity, and Harry resolved to find out exactly what she meant by the look when he got back. There was no time just now for women, though. Yet he shivered a little, for she somehow gave the impression she was measuring him for a coffin.

Harry stood for a second, his lips half pursed, as if he was going to whistle but was too preoccupied. Curious dress even for a model, he mused. With that golden metal thing on her head she looked like an ancient queen. Then he barged out the door, getting up speed for a run.

Ching threw up his hands in disgust. Always something to interrupt a man's serious work; it never failed. Just when he had received a perfect model as a gift from Heaven. Why, she didn't even chatter distractingly, as every other model he ever had did. She was something worth painting. Far more important than any old wrecked flying saucer. The silly goon—to think some strange worn out airplane was important. He sat down, began to change his shoes without enthusiasm. Heirae watched him with wide-eyed expectancy.

Across the lake, heading toward Ching's rented lodge, a rowboat splashed heavily, and an old man tied up to the flimsy wharf. Dan Madigan took a hearty pull from the bottle at his hip, then lurched across

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the wharf and up the trail to the lodge. The artist would be good for a touch; he was a good joe. Madge hadn't left him a cent today.

Sitting forlornly in the rowboat was also a little girl. Her hair was in pig-tails, her face shining scrubbed, her hands folded demurely on her lap. She called after the old inebriate: "Don't you be long, gramps. Madge said she'd spank me if I let you out of my sight!"

Ching could be seen leaving the lodge, his back to the lake. The old man circled the lodge and made after the disappearing form. This was strictly against orders, and the little girl ran after him. But first she paused at the doorway to peer into the mysterious magic of the artist's studio.

Heirae sat where Ching had started to paint her, her eyes full of patient resignation—the patience which had seen her across the endless years of flight. Waiting had been her life, she was thinking sadly. When would true life begin, anyway?

"Hello, can I come in a minute?" little Truly Madigan called from the doorway.

Heirae rose with startling swiftness, holding out her hands to the little girl and clasping her to her heart, kissing her over and over. Little Truly was not used to such a fuss. The lady had such sad black eyes, she didn't have the heart to seem reluctant. She didn't pull away.

"Damn all flying saucers!" Ching was furious at the interruption to his work. "And damn all the Canadian Mounted Police, too, while you're about it . . ." Ching scrambled over the top of the ridge, making hard work of the heavy underbrush.

"Give 'em Hell," agreed Dan Madigan, catching up with his quarry. "Have a drink, you long-haired city dude, you."

"Give me that bottle, you old reprobate! In me it'll do some good, in you it'll only make trouble." Ching O'Neil took a good pull at the whisky. He didn't give the bottle back, and Dan didn't ask. He knew the artist would pay him to get another as soon as it took effect. He had known Ching for three summers past.

Some of the exasperation went out of the artist as he stood looking down the ridge at the vast expanse of time-pitted metal hull from the unknown. It was replaced with silent awe, and then further exasperation that all the Mountie could say about this momentous event was "flying saucer."

The two stood below the open port from which came a musty odor of stale air and long dead men—Ching wondering if that peculiar-acting tragic-faced beauty who had entered through his window had come out of this mountain of musty metal? The great round door hung open in the side, a metal link ladder dangled to the fire-scarred soil. The artist scrambled up, and old Dan followed with difficulty.

To Ching O'Neil it was the alien artwork inside that impressed. He did not see the multiple gadgetry everywhere incomprehensible in repeating complexity, he saw only the wall plaques in ebony and gold and

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strange gems from the stars. He saw the ivory sheen of the naked nymph poised above the banquet board, the utter grace of the wall curves and the masterly design of the fittings. He saw the luxurious richness of the furnishings, the weird tapestry thrown across the odd shaped wall table.

Old Dan saw the corpses sitting in dry-as-dust macabre gayety at the board, smelled the dry death of the ancient over-used air, and his hair stood on end with fear of the utter unworldliness, the super natural power prisoned here. He tore the half empty bottle from Ching's unwilling hand, drained it, threw it aside.

"Let's get out of here, Mr. O'Neil! I never saw a ghost before, and I don't like the looks of 'em now I see 'em!"

"Why you old fool!" Ching laughed excitedly. "This ship is worth its weight in Aga Khans! The pedestal that nymph is standing on is solid gold! The gems on the walls, set in the chairs, sparkling on the paneling—any one of 'em would keep a man in luxury for a lifetime! Where's your cupidity? And I thought you were a mercenary old scrounger!"

Old Dan touched the foot of the nude nymph with reluctant awe, gazed about with new respect. "You telling the truth? That thing is solid gold? She's worth a fortune, ain't she?"

A strange rasping voice whirled them both around. "Right pretty sight, all them jewels."

The voice that rasped was just above the muzzle of a rifle. The grin on the unshaven face was quiet, contained an unmistakable deadly quality. The weather-lined skin was stretched over a face both found too familiar. That face had been on so many posters even the artist recognized it from his few local trips to the postoffice.

"Jim Peke!" said Dan, sighing with sudden complete deflation. "Just as I was figuring some of this gold and stuff might stick to my fingers, you have to come along!"

Ching O'Neil remembered the Mountie had charged him to look after this thing, and sighed, too. He had forgotten to bring a gun! He damned the flying saucers again, for making him disrespectful of the possibilities for truth in the Mountie's words. Ching sat down dejectedly on the rim of what looked like a wash basin with television attachments, complete with a cupid about to take off into flight.

The way they had come from the entry port was a long slanting corridor, sloping upward and turning on itself. Along this corridor now floated the excited voice of little Truly Madigan.

"Oh, Lady, truly this is a magic ship, isn't it? Truly it must be!"

Dan Madigan raised a suddenly desperate voice in harsh entreaty: "You get out of this and go straight home, you hear me, Truly!"

Truly shouted back at him: "Madge told me not to let you out of my sight, and you sneaked off anyway. I'm going to tell her, too!"

Jim Peke circled the huge salon warily, to get the bottom of the ramp

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in front of him and his back to a wall. But down the stairs came only little Truly, dancing with wonder and anticipation. Then after her came the "lady," face still set in lines of weariness, but an utterly lovely vision in floating red diaphanous gown, crowned by the mass of midnight hair and the strange headgear of gold wire and gems.

Jim kept the rifle barrel swinging from Dan to Ching to the strange woman. Jim recognized her for proprietor of this wealthy mausoleum of an airship, and for a second awe almost took possession of his doubly blind mind—to be brushed aside.

"You two can just line up there beside the other pair and keep quiet till I figure where to lock you up. Otherwise you're liable to get hurt!"

Jim was half scared of the woman, but determined to assert his rights to appropriate anything of value that seemed portable.

Truly and Heirae paid no attention to Jim Peke, Heirae not understanding the words, Truly not realizing or bothering to make sense of them, so absorbed was she in the strange lady and the magic ship. They went on across the big salon, talking little girl sounds to each other, and on out an arched opening forward.

Jim Peke stood with his mouth open. It had been so long since anyone failed to show fear at sight of him. His rifle seemed useless in his hands. Old Dan sniggered at his expression, but shut up as Jim shouted savagely:

"Couldn't shoot a little girl and lady, you dinged fool. Let 'em go, they never noticed me anyway. But don't think I ain't taking what I want and getting out of here!"

Dan answered him with less respect in his voice: "Well, go ahead and take, nobody's arguing with you. But if I was you I would get fast, because somebody is liable to show up that wants this stuff worse than you, and has more guns to get it with."

Ching had pulled a sketch pad from his pocket and was busily taking quick sketches of details of the ornate architectonic design of what he recognized as the only space ship salon in the world. Also the only art from another world he might ever have a chance to study. Mentally he fumed, for every time an artistic opportunity came his way, there was some flap-jawed hyena like Jim Peke or the Mountie to clutter up his time and thinking.

Up in the living quarters which had been her only home since the death of the rest of ship's personnel, Heirae found for Truly a soldier doll, wound it up and set it marching gravely in a circle, saluting at every third step.

Truly was in transports of delight, crowing and imitating the stiff-legged walk of the doll's mechanical movement.

Mrs. Brown, having noticed the inebriated condition of Dan Madigan, got into Dan's boat and rowed across the lake. She meant to find Madge, Dan's daughter, who kept him in line when he went on a binge. And that happened whenever he got hold of

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the price of a bottle.

Naturally she had not missed a word of the Mountie's declaration about the flying saucer over the ridge, having been listening from the kitchen door. Finding Madge gone to Eau Pleine in the jeep, she proceeded to unfold the juicy news to Madge's neighbors, the Al Pacs.

Mr. Al Pac, being Indian, proceeded to smoke signal a distant Indian encampment with whom he held a long conversation. The Indians, being conversationalists beyond the white man's concept of gossip, proceeded to pass the word along across the mountains in repeating signal smokes.

As a result, a certain no-good half-breed went into a little known dug-out where a radio transmitter operated illegally, and the news was on the air of a spy network which embraced all of Canada as well as Alaska. The renegade went off drinking his well earned jug of whisky, and a helicopter with several agents of an "un-named foreign power" aboard lifted into the air out of the wilderness, whirred toward the site where Heirae played innocently with the first child she had met for no man can conceive the stretch of time—least of all Heirae, for Heirae was the victim of something only to be learned by Earthmen when they conquer space—time-madness.

Heirae had lost all track of normal routines of life and thought and lived in a mental world, timeless and peculiar to herself, incomprehensible to all others.

Harry French, of the Northwest Mounted, whose discovery had started the chain of events, broke into a run for the telephone when he sighted the fire tower. He leaped over a fallen log and landed with a badly sprained ankle. He could not bear weight upon it except for some more urgent reason than a flying saucer. If it *was* a saucer? It hadn't looked like any saucer to Harry. It had looked unbelievable. Harry lay thinking what a spot he would be on if he made his report and the Chief came and found the thing gone! Harry didn't place any too much faith in the mere evidence of his own eyes. It would probably prove to be a mistake of some kind, or it would run off and leave him holding the bag.

He lay and nursed the ankle and thanked Providence for giving him a good excuse to stay out of something he well knew could prove embarrassing It could become an incident which he would never be able to live down! Harry was one of those numerous individuals who did not believe in disk ships even when he saw them himself. Harry had a faint suspicion the orders that had been given to report all flying saucer rumors was some kind of trap to pick out the hysterics and unreliables from the force.

Jim Peke, finally figuring out how he could get what he wanted without turning his back on his captives, made old Dan take hammer and chisel from Jim's pack and start knocking gems out of the wall decorations.

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When Dan started chiseling out great chunks of gold from the nude nymph's pedestal, a maze of strange leaf forms stylized into a support for her airy feet, Ching O'Neil saw red. The ignorant vandalism made him cast aside his sketch pad. He yelled:

"Touch that statue again and I'll hammer both your thick heads to a juicy pulp!"

He got up and strode purposefully toward the startled Jim Peke, who couldn't figure out just what had turned a meek, plump, white-faced city dude into a battling red-eyed maniac. Jim retreated into a wall niche as far as he could. Then sheer desperation and fear made him swing the butt of his rifle to the transformed Ching O'Neil's stubborn jaw, and the Irish went out of him as he slumped unconscious to the chased metal of the floor.

Dan had already filled the sack half full of battered gems and roughly chiseled hunks of supposed gold. Jim Peke figured it was about time to get out before somebody else went crazy, swung the bag to his shoulder and made for the door.

Outside, the helicopter, manned by three swarth oriental-eyed operatives whose origins had been on the steppes of the other side of the world, had landed. The three, who posed as affluent Indians here in Canada, alighted, and were looking over the seemingly deserted ship. Satisfied there was no one about, they extracted three automatic rifles from the gondola of the helicopter and advanced on the strange ship.

Jim Peke, barging out the doorway with his sack of loot, gave a startled squawk at sight of the deadly drums of ammunition in the three chatter-guns, ducked back. He dropped his sack, levered a cartridge into his rifle and fell to his knees at the side of the round air-lock. He fired and wounded one of the three whom he recognized as rivals for the wealth of the ship.

The wounded Tartar, lying abandoned as his companions took cover in the brush to right and left, fired a burst into the dark round doorway out of self protection. The bullets richocheted all about Jim Peke, two of them lodging in his left hip. Jim felt very bad, and very mad, so he drilled the wounded man between the eyes. Then he retreated down the corridor, where he could pick off anything that showed a head before he himself could be seen.

The racket at the entryway did not disturb old Dan. He was drunkenly hacking away at the nude nymph's pedestal with hammer and chisel, filling a sack of his own formed by tying the sleeves of his coat together. Ching O'Neil was sleeping off the effects of the rifle butt on the chin, and the racket did not affect him, either.

But Heirae cocked an ear that had not been assaulted by any such barbaric sounds in her whole life—and that was a very long time. Little Truly listened, shouted: "Bang, bang! Truly they's a war outside!"

The grave meditation of the skeletons ranged about the great banquet board was not disturbed at all. They only shivered a little at the vibrations

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of the crude weapons of the vandals.

Heirae picked up a silver wand with a glowing golden point. She walked calmly toward the racket. The comrades of the dead Tartar had emptied both drums into the opening and were slipping spares into place when Heirae came with graceful half-floating steps up the corridor past the recumbent Jim Peke, who had seized the respite to tear the ragged overalls away from his thigh and inspect the wounds.

Heirae made a sound in her cheeks. "Tuck, tuck!" Her face flamed with sudden wrath and she swept on past the fugitive from a dozen murders, stood in the round air lock, her wand raised. From the tip a little globe of light sprang, made for the two agents of "an unnamed foreign power" and touched one on the forehead.

His body stiffened and his face assumed a look of utter befuddlement. He remained motionless with the drum half in, half out of his gun. His companion, a great fear in his bowels, slammed ammunition into place in his own gun and let go a burst at the slim alien loveliness in the round opening.

But the fear of the unnatural had made him hasty; the bullets spattered on the metal all about her. From her wand sprang another tiny globe, and seemingly animated by an anger and will and direction all its own, swept toward him. He sprang to his feet, ran dodging and leaping, but the little globe followed with complete disregard for his evasive tactics, caught him in mid-leap. He landed with a sound like a sack of rocks striking a plank.

He remained, frozen, a statue of arrested motion, stroboscopic sculpture realized. Heirae turned back, anger still flaming on her pallid countenance, her eyes a mystic far-off stare of incomprehensible emotion.

She paused beside the groaning figure of Jim Peke, touched with unbelieving fingers the raw wounds on his exposed flesh, her eyes filled with puzzlement that such a thing could be. Bending above him, she touched her silvery wand to the two wounds. Little globules of silver mist oozed gently out, remained for an instant above the wounds like floating petals, then attached themselves to the bloody flesh about the holes.

In an instant the wounds were covered with the silver beads of strange substance, and Jim Peke sighed with relief. He started to get up, but Heirae pressed him back, and her eyes fastened on his for a moment.

Into his face crept swiftly a look of utter, dog-like obedience. He relaxed. In a second he was fast asleep, snoring. Heirae moved off, rejoined Truly at her play.

Truly had found a picture book, and was leafing through the volume in which the wonders of another world were pictured in glowing colors, prismatic and realistic as three dimensioned printing could make them. Heirae squatted with Truly above the book, stroking the little girl's dark, straight hair. After a minute she unbraided the two pigtails, began to comb the none too well kept locks.

The comb she used had a little

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knob on the handle, which Heirae adjusted. The straight black hair began to writhe under the teeth of the metal comb, and as she plaited it up again, the hair was no longer straight, but curly as any artist's brush could have painted.

Truly stood up, examined the result of Heirae's work in the oval mirror of polished metal.

"You've combed it curly, truly! Truly you did! In all my born days I wished for curly hair! You're just like a fairy godmother, truly you are!"

Heirae said: "Tuck, tuck." It was a very sweet sound now, and not angry at all. It was time for the little girl to return to her home. Heirae took her by the hand, and not looking down into the big salon where old Dan went madly on with his vandalism, and Ching O'Neil slept the sleep of the unjustly assaulted, moved off past the snoring Jim Peke, out of the port and so to Ching's log lodge.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Brown, having gossiped away the afternoon, had told her tale to the returned Madge Madigan. Madge had rowed her back across the lake to recapture the errant Dan and the pursuant Truly.

Arriving at the lodge, and finding no one, the two women had decided to have a look at this flying saucer themselves. They toiled up the slope among the tall brush, even as Heirae and Truly went lightly down past them twenty feet away. Neither pair was conscious of the other's passing, which was a wonder, for Truly seldom stopped chattering that long. But Truly was getting sleepy.

At the lodge, seeing the boat in place and Madge's hat on the table, Truly knew everything was all right. She curled up on Ching's camping bed and promptly went to sleep. Heirae sat patiently with folded hands, her eyes drifting absently over O'Neil's paintings, ranged along the walls in various stages of completion.

Presently the other world woman lifted an untouched expanse of white canvas onto the easel before her, picked up Ching's palette, squeezed the tubes of paint with eyes curious of the squirming worms of color. Her face lost its strained detachment and brooding, aimless sorrow. She picked up Ching's brushes where he had dropped them that morning.

She set to work, trying each color in little dabs of experiment, presently began to work out a pattern of great whirling movements. Gradually upon the canvas grew a scene such as only a spaceman's eyes could appreciate—the vast panorama of an ether storm, the tremendous spiralling motion of in-crushing gravitons answering the awful forces of infinity.

Her eyes unsatisfied, she laid the half finished canvas aside, picked up another clean surface. She began to depict Truly's sleeping face absently, with little spiral movements of the brush picking out the soft flesh shadows, the bright apple cheeks, the dark lashes shadowing childhood's dream. The newly acquired pixyish curl on the forehead, the ringlets by the ear, the dark vigor of the heavy braid, the curve of the relaxed sweet neck.

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Heirae sighed with some far past nostalgic memory, put the palette aside, fell to brooding over the gathering darkness of the studio.

Then she felt the chill of the approaching night, rose and glided from the room. With her went all the magic, and the room became just a dull log shack with a little girl sighing in her sleep. As Heirae went through the door, the silver wand dripped one bright drop into the air. It floated softly toward the child, sank into her forehead like a visible benediction.

The stars began to come out above Heirae. She stood looking up at the too familiar sight, her hands clenched into fists, on her face a dark desperation of frustration. She had found life, but not her kind.

Off by the fire tower, the Mountie finished his reluctant crawl, lifted the receiver of the emergency phone. Overhead he heard the guard in the tower begin the long climb down, knew he was seen. Over the wires to Eau Pleine sang the story of the finding of the space ship.

Madge and Mrs. Brown entered the strange ship with trepidation, clambering up the ladder, tiptoeing down the huge metal corridor with awe, their mouths open with unbelief struggling with the evidence of their eyes. The snoring Jim Peke, they did not recognize, went silently around the recumbent figure.

They found old Dan, his labors having worn him out, likewise slumbering noisily, his head propped up on the stomach of the likewise snoring Ching O'Neil.

Madge stood surveying the scene, her eyes disapproving of the frank lewdness of the nude nymph flaunting her graceful body above the mummified bodies of the alien dead at their macabre endless feast. Then she planted the toe of her practical leather oxford in old Dan's protruding stomach and he awoke with a screech and a clatter from his bag.

"Now, Madge, I ain't done a thing you wouldn't have done yourself . . . ." said Dan, vainly trying to hide his bundle of loot by shoving it behind O'Neil with the toe of his woodsman's boot. Madge pounced upon the coat, tied about with the arms, opened it.

Out spilled the products of his vandalism, the gems torn from the lovely wall decorations, the great chunks of soft gold from the pedestal of the still erect nymph. Madge looked around at the abundant evidence of the ruthless destruction committed by the hand of her father. Then she reached over and got him by one large red ear, twisting hard. Old Dan came erect.

"Now, Madge, this here don't belong to anybody! And that thief, Jim Peke, made me do it at the point of a gun! I only thought that as long as it was spoiled anyway I might as well get myself some of it. Now, Madge, it ain't like you think at all!"

"Is that Jim Peke a'snorin' up in the entry?" asked Madge, anger quivering in her voice, making it shrill and frightening to old Dan, who like timid Truly, had been ruled by his iron-fisted daughter for many years.

Dan nodded.

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"Go up and get his gun, Amy," said Madge to Mrs. Brown. Amy went off on her mission, only to return and report that Jim Peke had departed for parts unknown since their arrival.

"And where is that brat, Truly, you good for nothing old soak. Every time I turn my back both of you get into some kind of scrape. At your age a body'd think you'd have some sense!"

"Last I seen her she was playing with the lady that owns the ship . . ." murmured Dan.

"So it don't belong to anybody, and you went right on and tore up the place while you saw and knew there was the owner right there! Didn't she stop you?"

"She didn't pay any attention to anyone but Truly. She was right taken with Truly. That's why I went ahead, it didn't seem to matter to her."

After a search of the ship revealed nothing, Madge marched old Dan home. Mrs. Brown shook Ching awake.

"You'd better come along and get some supper. As far as I know you haven't eaten since this morning. You must be starved, Mr. O'Neil! Whatever gave you that bruise on your chin? It's big as a goose egg!"

Ching arose groggily, his head splitting. He looked around at the scarred beauty of the frescoes and bas-reliefs, the gouged out holes where gems had graced the alien beauty, at the battered base of the graceful nude nymph. He groaned:

"And I was supposed to guard this ship! My God, people are abysmal ignorants! Look what they've done to that masterpiece, look at the walls!"

Mrs. Brown had little sympathy with his violated aesthetic sense. She sniffed.

"Just as well if they had knocked the bare naked hussy right off of there! You come along and get something to eat. Nobody can do any guarding without a gun, anyway. You better come home and get your gun if you insist on doing what that fool Mountie couldn't do himself. Where did he get to, he was so all-fired concerned? Ran and hid himself in the woods, probably, scared to death of this monster ship from God knows where and I don't care! This is government business. If they don't tend to it, it's no job of yours! They'll probably blame *you* with scratching it all up and stealing the jewels. I'd stay plumb away from it if I was you; it can only mean trouble."

Ching O'Neil followed the insistent Mrs. Brown homeward to his rented lodge. There little Truly was explaining to the still angry Madge all about the fairy who had given her a soldier doll, had combed her hair curly, and shown her the picture book.

But Madge was too angry to listen, and spanked her soundly for not keeping a better watch on old Dan.

"You let old Dan get us into a mess of trouble, Truly. Nobody can tell what it'll lead up to. Didn't you see what he was doing?"

"But Madge, the lady saw him and didn't say anything. It's her place; I

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can't tell people what to do in her place. You know it must be fairyland where she come from, Madge; you never saw anything like it in any other books. Such pictures I never see in all my born days, truly I didn't!"

"Saw," corrected Madge, paying no attention.

Mrs. Brown and Madge began to get supper, deciding it better to stay together.

"Anything can happen with such goings on," as Mrs. Brown put it. As they sat to table, Mountie Harry French knocked and entered.

"You'd better get over there and guard that ship yourself, officer," said O'Neil to his questioning face. "I never spent a worse day. Vandals have practically wrecked the artwork, and they tell me there was some shooting between a bandit and someone who attacked him. I've been unconscious half the day from a rifle butt on my chin. I wash my hands of your discovery, and I hope you have more luck with it than I did."

Occupied with their adult importance, and all trying to tell their account of the day and their own impressions, no one noticed little Truly slip out the door. Truly was smarting from the undeserved spanking, but the real purpose of her trip was to get the soldier doll which she had forgotten and left lying where he had fallen from the last rewinding. That was in the corridor of the strange "place" of the lady.

Heirae did not notice the little girl board the ship. She sat brooding in the big observation chamber in the nose, and as the darkness grew blacker, felt the night chill from the entry port. She got up and closed the air lock. Then she was struck by sudden resolve, fruit of her day's unpleasant experiences. She went to the controls, lifted her ship again into the night.

Outward, outward, no matter how far, no matter how endless the fall of life's sweet petals upon the dark waters of time. She must find her own kind or die searching!

Ching O'Neil, after supper, moved to put away his canvases. He found the strange painting of the ether storm, the paint wet to his touch. He looked with the gasoline lamp which was his night illumination; looked and gasped at the mind that had moved here to create something Ching would have given both legs to be able to do. He stared, confounded, at the painting of little Truly, noting the evidence of emotions greater than human in the tender treatment. He wondered who among these ignorant people could appreciate the miracle that had occurred on his canvases and stood silent before the impossibility of telling them what the painting meant.

It was only minutes by the clock, but fifty thousands of miles outward from Earth, that Truly found her doll and moved on through the strangely heavy, shifting passages to find her "lady."

She found Heirae brooding over the complex levers of the control panels, ran into her arms, kissed the

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dear lady with tears on her face.

"Please don't make me go back, fairy godmother, please don't send me home!"

The light of youth, the light of love in Truly's eyes, lit something in Heirae's empty heart. She pressed the little girl to her lonely breast, and tears came again to eyes so long dry she wondered why they were suddenly wet.

Against the fantastically woven embroidery of black space moved an ebon shape, blotting out the bright counterpoint of the stars. Upon the ebon shape one round window showed dim light.

Framed by the ancient pitted metal of the port two bright faces peered out, watching the stars wheeling slowly past. Two faces, so dissimilar, yet each bearing an expression of child-like wonder and delight in life.

The hands of Heirae unplaited the child's hair, combed out the snarls, and she knew now that the endless time would not seem long with little Truly to find wonder and beauty in every moment.

THE END

Paul Wright, R. F. D. No. 2, Lake Road, LeRoy, N. Y. would like penpals, also SF readers near Rochester, N. Y., back copies *Amazing Stories* containing Shaver's stories . . . Arthur C. Berger, Jr., 1640 North Park Ave., Chicago 14, Ill., has all back issues of FATE for sale . . . Nikia Jaye, Stark, Kansas, would like to make connections with anyone interested in astrology, occult or psychic research. Age or sex no barrier. Will also exchange literature and addresses where occult books may be bought. Nikia is 28, married, four children, 5'6", weighs 140, red-brown hair and tawny eyes . . . Elenore West, Rt. 4, Box 128, Visalia, Calif., is lonesome. Her husband is in the hospital with cancer. Will somebody please write her? . . . M. E. Stuart, 4075 N. Castle Ave., Portland 12, Oregon, wants *Slan* and *Best of Science Fiction* (Crown Publications) bookjackets . . . Roscoe E. Wright, 146 E. 12th Ave., Eugene, Oregon, Phone 5-5774, wants partners in the publishing of VITON via photo-offset. Can get it done for only $25.00 per issue, wishes to go quarterly. Partnership starts at $5.00 and up and naturally it is not a sound investment economically, but you will help in putting out a good mag and have a say in it. Also, the Eugene SF Society meets from now on at the above address twice per month. Once at 7:30 P. M. the second Wednesday and at 2 P. M. the last Sunday . . . Gertrudis Lopez, 86 Oak Street, Jersey City, N. J., is interested in corresponding with Science Fiction and Fantasy fans of her own age (21) . . . Mrs. Nora Loughren, Carsonville, Michigan, has access to a meteorite which fell near her home in 1910. Anyone who writes her enclosing a stamped envelope, addressed to themselves, and 25c in coin will receive a generous piece . . . J. Leon Tucker, 404 - 7th Avenue, East, Cullman, Alabama, would like to correspond with science fiction fan who likes to exchange ideas . . . R. J. Banks, Jr., 111 South 15th Street, Corsicana, Texas, has a general fanzine. First issue 15c, all others 25c. Also is planning to start fantasy lending library next summer. Contributions of pro and fanzines, comic books, books, and/or money will be appreciated.

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NEWS OF THE MONTH

Latest reports on what our readers are doing. Fan clubs, social events and personalities in the limelight.

ROG PHILLIPS has moved to New York, and gives as his reason "the growing need to be near his rapidly developing markets which are now expanding into other fields than stf." No, no, Rog, not that! Let's keep up those fine stories. Rog is doing a sequel to *Venus Trouble Shooter* in the first issue of OTHER WORLDS, which will explain how Elmer managed to cut his operating expenses down to zero.

Howard Browne, now at Ziff-Davis, has been made editor of a new detective magazine intended for the high-class detective reader. It will be 144 pages, and will be 8½ by 11 size. As a result, Paul Fairman, who wrote "The Tiger" in the February issue of *Amazing Stories,* will desert his science fiction writing and take a job as associate editor on *Amazing* and *Fantastic.* He will assist Bill Hamling, who has been making some rapid additions to his staff of authors, due to *Amazing's* added 32 pages.

It is rumored that the Eastern Conference of science fiction fans will be held during the week of July 4th, next year. New York and vicinity fans will want to attend, and we'll give facts when they are definite.

Lester Del Rey recently paid a visit to Chicago, making arrangements with Ziff-Davis and OTHER WORLDS to provide top-notch fiction to both markets via Scott Meredith Agency.

Forrest J. Ackerman has ended the last two remaining feuds in "fandom" by reinstating Ziff-Davis pulps to consideration by California fans, and by submitting manuscripts to Ray Palmer, of OTHER WORLDS. A story by E. E. Evans was immediately purchased.

Stanley Mullen's "Kinsmen Of The Dragon," 256 pages, 85,000 words, will be published in book form by *Venture Books* in January or February, 1950. It will be the first of a series of original novels never before published in any form. Advance proofs of the book shown to us convince us this is a tremendous novel, and that it will create a sensation in the science fiction world. It will sell for $3.00.

Richard S. Shaver, creator of the cave mystery, has purchased a farm near Amherst, Wisconsin, and has shucked city dust from his feet forever.

Hannes Bok has consented to do a cover for OTHER WORLDS, but insists that he be given a free hand. He will be given a free hand—and a big one, we predict.

Fan artist Thomas Birbiglia, Jr., has sold two illustrations to OTHER WORLDS, continuing the policy of giving amateur artists in the science fiction field a break.

A Columbus, Ohio paper, on Sunday, Oct. 23, had an article entitled "Science Fiction Grows Up" and carrying pics of Jack Williamson, Everett Bleiler, and other prominent science fiction personalities.

The movie "Flying Saucer" produced by Mikel Conrad of Colonial Pictures, will be released soon, carrying a sensational 900 feet of film of actual flying saucers filmed in Alaska. The film has been okayed by the Army as authentic.

Rog Phillips' pocketbook "Time Trap" is reported to be doing so well that its publisher, Century Publications, is planning a series of six novels by Rog Phillips to be released in rapid succession.

Kenneth Arnold, famous flying saucer expert, is planning a series of actual "on the scene" recordings of accounts of flying saucers, including his own confidential report, which will be made available to readers of OTHER WORLDS who may wish to have living voice records of the most mysterious events of today, positively proving the existence of the mysterious disks. We believe this new idea in reporting will cause a sensation, and ought to be welcome to science fiction fans. More on it later.

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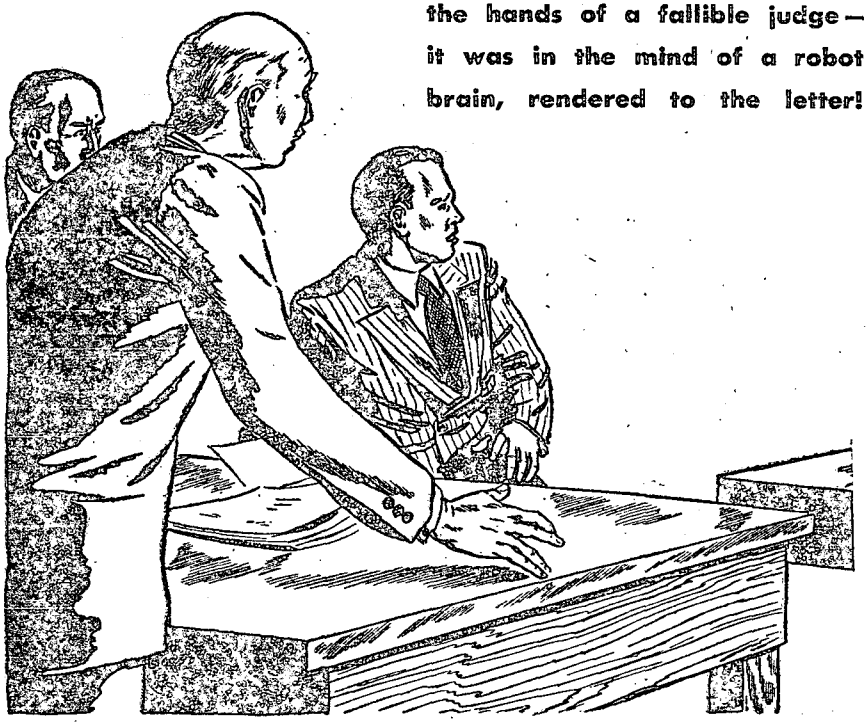
THE FATAL TECHNICALITY

By ROG PHILLIPS

Jurisprudence no longer was in the hands of a fallible judge—it was in the mind of a robot brain, rendered to the letter!



THE ringing of the car telephone brought George out of the depths of his morose thoughts enough to enable him to reach out and pluck the phone from its spring holders and lift it to his ear. The mechanical voice that sounded over it only served to send him deeper into gloom, though.

"You are found guilty of traffic violations," the voice said. "Pull over to the curb and wait for the arresting officer to arrive. Not obeying this order will result in prison confinement upon

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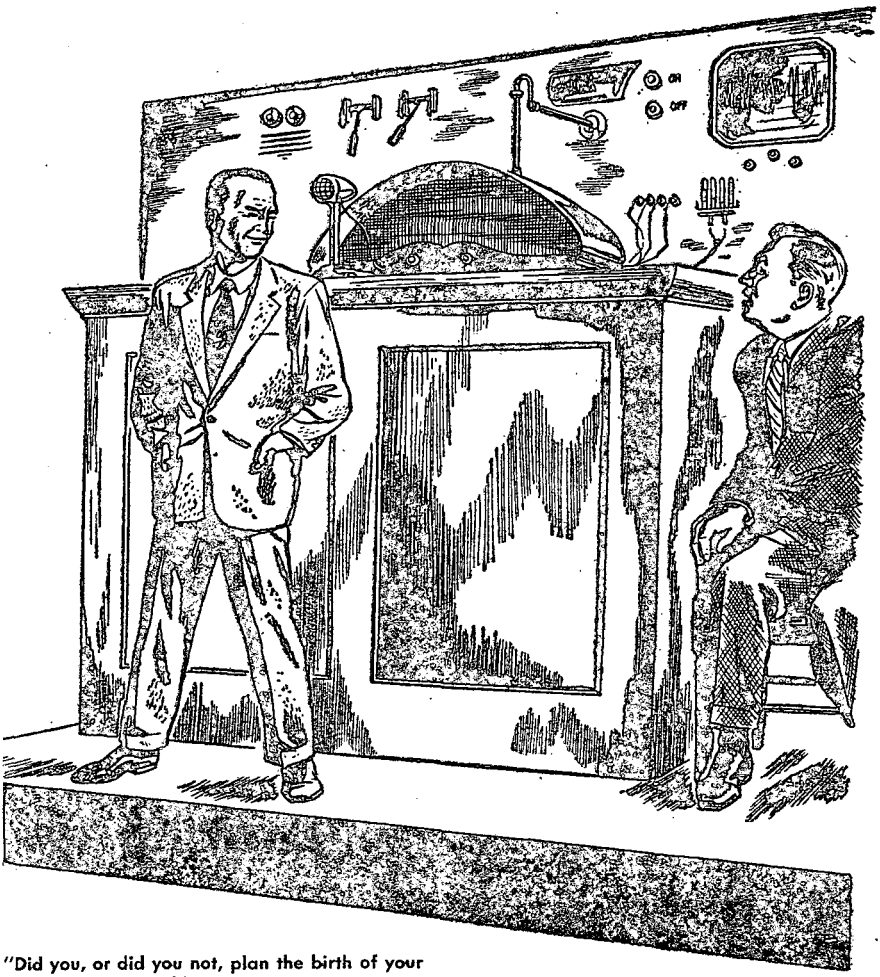

"Did you, or did you not, plan the birth of your son? Was it a deliberate action on your part that brought him into existence? Yes, or no?"

apprehension."

George was careful not to express his feelings vocally until he had shoved the phone back into its holder.

"Darn this mechanized traffic supervision," he said bitterly. "Thirty miles in a twenty-five mile zone, and bingo, your car squeals on you. You're tried and convicted by a bunch of radio tubes, and you have to pay five bucks a month for the phone they use to give you the works."

The "bunch of radio tubes" was

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not interested in what George might be saying. It was making similar calls to motorists at the rate of ten a minute. It was, further, checking back files on each case, cracking down on habitual traffic violators, and giving first warning calls to violators with no past record. Further, it was giving overtime tickets to parked cars at the rate of three a second, all over the city.

In addition, it was trying two hundred and forty-three criminal cases, eight hundred and sixty-seven civil cases, and eight thousand divorce cases at the time it called George on his car telephone.

George pulled over to the curb. Five impatient minutes later a police car stopped beside him and collected the five-dollar fine, giving him a receipt and clearing him through the court.

He drove on, careful not to go above the speed limit. He observed all the laws carefully, conscious of the scanners that watched him from street corners.

When he parked his car in the parking lot the attendant grinned at his departing back, reading on his face that he had been given a ticket.

It was two blocks to the office building. At the first street crossing he stepped off the curb while the light was still red.

A loudspeaker ten feet above the sidewalk beside him said metallically: "Get back on the sidewalk until the light turns green."

He got back on the sidewalk. The scanner had seen him step off, had identified it as jaywalking and spoken its warning. At the same time, the "bunch of radio tubes" had convicted a killer and sentenced him to the gas chamber. It could handle over fifty thousand separate thought trains on the one circuit.

In the office George found nothing to improve his disposition. There was a letter from Olsen, Olsen, Skinner, and Olsen informing him that their representative would consult with a representative from Goldstein, Goldstein, Silverstein and Goldstein, his own lawyers, sometime within the next ten days, on the matter of George Sanders (himself) versus Samuel Grant.

He crumpled the letter in his hands and talked earnestly to himself in the universal language of adjectives for a few minutes until his temper had cooled off. The adjectives modified one Samuel Grant in various and unique ways.

Then he stabbed at the button on his desk that would summon his secretary, breaking his fingernail in the process. The modifying the adjectives were doing switched to the buzzer and the broken fingernail.

Samuel Grant, known as Sam Grant except where legal papers contained his name, was one of the "huge" type of people. His hugeness started with his barrel chest and big hands. It extended to his feet, his face, and even to his heart. The people who said his heart was gold didn't mean it was heavy, metallic, and yellow.

However, for three days it had been very heavy. The reason for its heavi-

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ness was the death of his only son, Fred Grant, in a plane crash.

Sam's huge frame was pressing the castors of his office chair into the hardwood flooring behind his desk when his secretary brought in the mail.

"There are several personal letters for you, Sam," his secretary said timidly, standing in the doorway of his office. "Would you care to look at them?"

Sam reached out and took the half dozen letters she held toward him. She retreated silently, closing the door with extreme care so as not to make a sound.

The letters were unopened. They were all marked personal. Sighing, Sam pulled open the center drawer of his desk, took out his letter knife and slit them all open before starting to read them.

The first three were from friends offering condolences for the loss of his son. He opened the fourth feeling almost cheerful. It did a man good to know his friends sympathized enough to drop him a letter.

The very first words of the fourth letter changed all that. They were: "You dirty, low-dealing crook."

Sam's eyes glanced up at the letterhead. It was from the firm owned by George Sanders. The signature at the end of the letter was that of George Sanders.

His face slack and expressionless, Sam's eyes went back to the letter's contents.

"You dirty, low-dealing crook," it read. "You aren't satisfied with my unjustly being tagged as at fault in that accident on highway 42. You have the crust to try to make me pay on top of it. I'm instructing my lawyers not to make any kind of settlement with you. You'll have to take it to court or drop it. If you take it to court I'll bring in as evidence the fact that your son just died in an accident, and point out that careless driving runs in your family. You should consider yourself lucky that I don't sue you myself. The reason I don't is that I'm a nice guy. Too bad you aren't."

Sam let the letter hang slack in his fingers while, in his mind's eye, he reviewed the accident. He had pulled into the center lane to make a left turn. Also he had held out his hand for a hundred yards in a clear signal.

He hadn't looked back to see if anyone was coming; but there was no need to, since it would have been illegal for anyone to have cut around him on the wrong side of the highway. That was evidently why Sanders considered him at fault—for not looking back and seeing him, and not waiting for him to get around him in an illegal passing.

He had started his turn, and Sanders had run into the side of his car, damaging the whole side. He had called the police at once, and the portable scanner on the police car had recorded the cars where they stood. The automatic action of the robot judicial system had immediately rendered a verdict that Sanders was at fault—which he was. And since he was at fault it was only fair that he pay for the damage he did.

Not even morally could Sam see

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himself to blame. And this letter. He eyed it distastefully. The thing tc do with it was turn it over to his lawyers to use as a basis for adding punitive damages onto the eight hundred dollars in repair bills and lawyer's fees he was asking for.

Still, there was this to consider: Sanders was upset. He would be upset too if he had to shell out eight hundred dollars, if he didn't think he was in the wrong.

But it was a dirty thing to do, bring his son into it so callously right now, and also come right out and call him names.

Sam compressed his lips into a firm line. His finger pressed the buzzer calling his secretary. When she came in he dictated a letter.

George Sanders hit the roof—almost literally—when he got the letter. It said, simply: "Your letter received and contents noted. Have turned said letter over to my lawyers with instructions that they use it as a basis for suit for punitive damages in addition to those already asked."

His hands trembling in the intensity of his anger, George called his lawyers. Their secretary answered.

"Hello-o," she sang.

"Hello," George shouted. "Is Mr. Goldstein there?"

"I'm sorry," she answered. "He's in court today."

"Well, is Mr. Silverstein there?" George asked.

"No he isn't," the secretary answered. "He's out of town until Friday. Would you like to speak to Mr. Goldstein?"

"That's who I asked for in the first place," George said angrily.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the secretary said. "Mr. Goldstein just left the office. He won't be back for an hour. But I can let you talk to Mr. Goldstein if you wish."

A rattling noise drowned out George's sputtering.

"Hello," a male voice sounded.

"Who is this?" George asked suspiciously.

"This is Mr. Silverstein," the voice answered.

"Your secretary said you were out of town," George said accusingly.

"Oh no," Mr. Silverstein answered. "That's Mr. Goldstein. Who's talking?"

"This is George Sanders," George said.

"Oh yes, Mr. Sanders," Mr. Silverstein said. "We have a letter from Olsen, Olsen, Skinner and Olsen, from Mr. Olson himself." There was a pause filled with hmmms. "I'm afraid you'll have to empower us to reach a settlement out of court, Mr. Sanders. You'll save yourself a hundred dollars lawyers fees and about eighty dollars court costs that way. Perhaps more."

"It's too late for that now," George said. Briefly he told Mr. Silverstein about his letter and Sam's reply.

"I see," Mr. Silverstein said heavily. "That casts a different light on it, of course. I'm afraid it's going to cost you money, unless—"

"Unless what?" George asked.

"Suppose you drop over to my office, Mr. Sanders," Mr. Silverstein's voice sounded, cautiously.

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"Then we could discuss ways and means in complete privacy."

"I'll be right over," George said.

"Have a drink?" Mr. Silverstein asked after shaking hands warmly with George Sanders and returning to his chair behind his desk.

"I need one," George said, dropping into the chair nearest him. "What's the scheme? Going to scare up some witnesses to prove the accident was Sam Grant's fault?"

"That's impossible," Mr. Silverstein said, pouring the two drinks and handing George one.

"Why?" George demanded. "I know of half a dozen guys that would swear they were there and saw the whole thing, for twenty bucks."

"You don't seem to understand," Mr. Silverstein said slowly. "Court procedure isn't the same as it was two years ago, before they installed the automatic jurisprudence setup. The masterbrain goes from fact to fact. It has on file the findings of the highway patrol scanner. That television eye identified everyone at the scene of the accident, and every detail of the post-collision setup. Its finding are final and can't be altered by any trumped-up evidence—although we'd be more than glad to help out a client that way if it could be done.

"But all they have me on," George objected. "Is that it's supposed to be against the law to pass going in the oncoming lanes. I had to, because all the right hand lanes were occupied. But can't you get around that ordinance? Aren't there any exceptions?"

"Not in automatic jurisprudence," Mr. Silverstein said, shaking his head with finality. "The laws and ordinances, and even the Constitution, are built right into the thought processes of the robot brain that renders the decisions. It couldn't act contrary to those built-in laws if it wanted to.

"In a way it's a distinct improvement over the old system. If Congress passes a law it goes into the basic setup of the robot brain, and if it's inconsistent with existing laws or the Constitution, that comes out at once.

"But in another way it's bad. We lawyers can't use oratory or tricks of law any more. The old orators who swayed juries are out of a job now. The modern lawyer has to know his law—or else!"

"But what about extenuating circumstances?" George persisted. "Couldn't I say my brakes were suddenly faulty? I know a garage mechanic who would appear and swear they were when I brought my car to him right after. You could point out that I was forced to swing into an illegal lane or deliberately hit someone."

"It wouldn't work," Mr. Silverstein said patiently. "The robot renders its decisions according to law, not extenuating circumstances. There are no extenuating circumstances any more in court trials. Especially in cut-and-dried traffic cases."

"Then Sam Grant can collect?" George asked.

"He's sure to collect if it goes to court," Mr. Silverstein said. "And

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that letter will ensure him an extra thousand dollars punitive damages. Not only that, unless I'm wrong it will bring him more than that, if you dictated it to your secretary. Did you?"

"Yes," George said, bewildered. "But what's that got to do with it?"

"That makes it public," Mr. Silverstein said. "As such, Mr. Grant can sue you for slander. He can get a judgment for ten thousand against you."

George stared at Mr. Silverstein.

"Unless," Mr. Silverstein went on. "We can force him to drop the whole thing."

"How can we do that?" George asked.

"How much capital do you have?" Mr. Silverstein asked. "The reason I ask is that there might be a possibility that Mr. Grant's business has a few notes outstanding that we could lay our hands on. Most businesses are vulnerable in some way. If you have the capital we might be able to sew him up tight so we could force him to drop this suit."

George shook his head.

"I don't have that kind of capital," he said. "In fact, it's the other way around. Grant could buy me out with his credit alone. I'm running on a shoestring."

"Well," Mr. Silverstein said. "Maybe we could help you a little on this. Could you raise five thousand?"

"And you put in the rest?" George asked eagerly. "Sure!"

"That isn't quite what I had in mind," Mr. Silverstein said smoothly. "What I meant was that the firm, Goldstein, Goldstein, I and Goldstein could buy up notes and mortgages on Mr. Grant's company and bring pressure against him. But that would involve risk of capital, and we would have to charge you considerable for doing it. The five thousand was our fee for doing so. You would be saving perhaps six to eight thousand dollars by doing things this way, since Mr. Grant and his lawyers can collect ten thousand for slander, a thousand punitive damages, and the eight hundred they originally asked for."

"I—I'll have to think it over," George said, staggering to his feet, his mind reeling. "You're sure there's a case of slander?"

"Positive," Mr. Silverstein said. "There was an identical case in 1946 involving Smith versus Smythe in the lower court at Ann Arbor, Michi—"

"Okay, Okay," George said groggily. "I believe you. I'll let you know tomorrow."

The first, soft light of early dawn was filtering soundlessly through the venetian blinds of the bedroom. In one of the twin beds Stella Sanders lay sleeping, her matronly bosom rising and falling gently in the rhythm of deep slumber.

In the other bed George Sanders lay still, his chest convulsing occasionally in a deep sigh, his sleepless eyes staring at the ceiling.

From somewhere in the house came the creak of a warping board; but except for George and Stella the

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house was empty. George's three living children had long ago married and moved into houses of their own. His other two, dead, reposed in untroubled slumber in urns at the mausoleum, long forgotten by the living.

George rolled over restlessly. He endured the suffocation of the pillow in his face for a minute, then rolled onto his back again.

"Five thousand dollar fee," his thoughts said. "Or maybe twelve thousand if it gets to court."

He sighed. The light of dawn crept further into the room.

"The robot renders its decisions according to law," Mr. Silverstein's voice spoke in his mind. "No extenuating circumstances."

"No extenuating circumstances," his mind echoed. "According to law, according to law, according to law."

He sighed deeply, trying to still his thoughts. Then, abruptly, he was sitting upright in bed, a startled look on his face.

The startled look remained as he slowly slid out of bed into his slippers. His hand fumbled for his cigarettes on the nightstand.

He inhaled deeply as he left the room. He made a brief phone call, then returned and quietly dressed. A few minutes later he drove his car down the driveway and sped across town.

Twenty minutes later he was arguing with a police officer.

"You have to present your evidence before we can do anything," the officer objected.

"I don't have to," George said. "I know my law as well as you do. Make out the warrant and I'll sign it."

"If you can't make it stick you're in for real trouble, signing such a warrant," the officer said warningly.

"I'll make it stick," George said. "Make out that warrant."

"All right," the officer gave in. "You want it served right away?"

"As soon as you can serve it," George said grimly.

The clatter of the officer's typewriter peppered the early morning silence of the police station. Then the warrant was yanked out of the machine. George signed it with a grim smile of satisfaction.

It was close to seven o'clock when he reached home. Stella was just getting up.

The phone rang. George Sanders reached over lazily and plucked it from its cradle.

"Mr. Sanders?" the voice asked. "This is Mr. Silverstein. Have you thought over my—er, suggestion of yesterday?"

"I don't need to," George said jovially. "I've already solved my difficulty. I won't need to use your—ah, plan."

"Oh?" Mr. Silverstein's voice said questioningly.

"No," George said. "In fact, I've already fixed everything. There won't even be a suit."

"You've—fixed—everything?" Mr. Silverstein asked doubtfully. "How?"

"Samuel Grant has been arrested for murder," George said gloatingly. A deep silence answered him. "Of his

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son," he added.

"That does cast a different light on things," Mr. Silverstein's voice said cautiously. "But you said *you* fixed everything. You mean you—?"

"That's right," George said. "I had him arrested. Maybe you'd like to be at the trial. You might learn a thing or two you didn't know about law."

"You can prove he murdered his son in that supposed plane accident?" Mr. Silverstein asked incredulously. "You have positive evidence? How'd you get it?"

"I have it," George said. "And never mind how I got it. The trial's at two o'clock. Be there?"

"I certainly will," Mr. Silverstein said. "And I hope for your sake you can make it stick, because if you don't you'll—"

"I know," George interrupted. "He can sue me for false arrest on top of everything else."

Sam Grant, his massive head and shoulders showing outraged protest in every line, was ushered into the courtroom between two guards.

George watched Sam's entrance with a smile concealed behind the palm of his hand. Most of the other seats in the room were vacant.

Mr. Goldstein, Mr. Goldstein, Mr. Silverstein, and Mr. Goldstein occupied the four aisle seats of the two front rows in the audience section. They were there merely to observe.

Mr. Olsen, Mr. Olsen, Mr. Skinner, and Mr. Olsen sat at the defense table.

There was only one other person, the court director, whose office had emerged from the old style court, and was that of bailiff combined with that of court stenographer.

The spot that had once been occupied by the judge now contained merely a microphone and a loudspeaker. At various strategic spots were scanners—at one time known as television cameras.

The preliminary routine slid smoothly into the past, with Sam Grant declaring himself not guilty, his lawyers moving for a postponement until they could prepare a defense, and George Sanders speaking into the microphone on the prosecution table that the nature of his evidence was such that the defense that had been outlined could not stand.

Somewhere in the vastness of the maze of wires, coils, condensers, and tubes that occupied several large buildings somewhere in the city, relays clicked. The motion for delay was denied. The trial proceeded.

At George's whispered request the loudspeaker called for Samuel Grant as the first witness. When he had taken the stand and been sworn in, the loudspeaker asked George to question him for the prosecution.

The defense objected. The loudspeaker pointed out that the trial was George Sander's responsibility, and its outcome would either result in Samuel Grant's conviction or in George Sanders' liability for false arrest, and that therefore Mr. Sanders would be permitted to conduct the questioning for the prosecution, since he was, in effect, the prosecution.

George stood up and walked with dramatic slowness to the foot of the

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witness stand. He asked just one question.

"Mr. Grant," he said. "When your son, Fred, was born, was it because you wanted a child, or because you couldn't avoid having one?"

"Why I—" Sam started. He paused while his lawyers objected, George assured the court the question was relevant, and the defense's objections were overruled. Then Sam went on: "Of course I wanted him. My wife and I had planned on having a child. It was our greatest wish."

"That's all," George murmured. "The defense may have the witness."

He sat down and hid another smile behind his hand, conscious of the mystification he had created.

Olsen, Olsen, Skinner and Olsen whispered hastily among themselves, then Mr. Olsen muttered, "No questions."

Goldstein, Goldstein, Silverstein and Goldstein looked at one another, a mixture of puzzlement and admiration in their eyes. George Sanders, to their knowledge, was the first man who had ever succeeded in mystifying Olsen, Olsen, Skinner and Olsen under any circumstances.

Samuel Grant was led from the witness chair to the defense table where he sat down. George Sanders then stood up and faced the loudspeaker.

"If it pleases the court," he said dramatically. "I would like to make a request of the court before proceeding further."

"You may do so," the loudspeaker said.

"I object," Mr. Skinner said.

"Objection overruled," the loudspeaker said almost before he had finished.

"Proceed, Mr. Sanders," the loudspeaker added.

"I would like the court to define what constitutes first degree murder," George said.

"First degree murder," the loudspeaker said. "Is the causing of the death of a person by deliberate intent. It consists of committing an act, or setting in motion a series of acts, which will and does directly or indirectly lead to the death of the deceased, and with the certain knowledge beforehand that such committing, or setting in motion, of said act or acts will result in the deceased's death."

"Then," George said, pausing and looking around at Mr. Silverstein triumphantly, "I wish to present as evidence the fact that Mr. Samuel Grant is aware that all men are mortal, and every person born must surely die, and that it is a matter of record in this court that he has admitted having deliberately and premeditatedly caused the deceased to be born, with the knowledge that by being born he must die. And that therefore, under the law, he did deliberately and with design commit an act or acts which he knew would inevitably lead directly or indirectly to the death of the deceased—"

There was a bedlam of voices that stilled only at the autocratic "Quiet!" shouted by the loudspeaker.

"I rest my case," George concluded.

In the vacuum of sound that settled abruptly over the courtroom

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there was not a movement as the loudspeaker came to life.

"Defendant found guilty as charged," it said unemotionally. "The defendant, Samuel Grant, will rise and face the court."

In the stunned silence that followed, the loudspeaker pronounced sentence: immediate execution in the gas chamber. It then pronounced court adjourned and ordered the prisoner away.

George Sanders walked down the center aisle past his paralyzed lawyers, opened the double doors to the anteroom, and stepped out into the hall.

In the hall on the way to the elevators he passed open doors where court employees were erupting to frantic activity.

On the street all was serene and calm as he made his way to his parked car. Climbing in, he glanced at his watch. It was too late to go to the office. He turned toward home. Suddenly he was very tired. He hadn't had any sleep the night before.

Here and there as he drove toward home he heard the wail of sirens, some close at hand, others far away.

And when, twenty minutes later, he drove his car into the garage in back of his house, there was a police car parked at the curb in front of the house.

He opened the kitchen door and went in.

"Oh, Martha," he called. "I'm home early."

"Oh! George!" his wife cried, running into the kitchen from the living room. "The police are here."

"George Sanders?" a grim voice asked from the doorway.

"Yes!" George said, puzzled.

"You are under arrest for murder," the officer said, handing him a warrant. "And I must warn you that anything you say will be used as evidence."

Dazed, George looked at the warrant. It stated that he was wanted for the murder of—Harry Sanders.

"But Harry died of cancer!" he exclaimed. "He's been dead for five —"

He stopped, realization dawning in his eyes.

Three days later he entered the long line waiting on the way to the gas chamber. When his turn came, he was pushed in and the door closed after him.

And as the days passed, the lines grew longer and longer, then shorter and shorter until finally there were no more lines waiting at the entrance to the gas chamber.

Justice had been administered; there was no one left except old maids, and a very few bachelors.

And children.

THE END

FATE Magazine — Charles Fort would have recommended it . . . You'll like it too! Get it at your newsstand today.

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THE BATTLE OF THE MOON

RECENTLY we read an article by John J. O'Neill. He was talking about the moon and how she got her craters, and he was quoting two scientists, geologist J. E. Spurr of Winter Park, Florida, and astronomer Ralph B. Baldwin of Johns Hopkins University.

Briefly, Dr. Spurr says: "all of the surface configuration can be explained on the basis of volcanic activity."

As briefly, Dr. Baldwin says: "the pock-marked appearance of the moon was caused by the bombardment of that planet by meteors, great and small."

Naturally, on one page, we can't go into the whole of their theories. But let's try to point out that *both* theories *are* only theories.

Both men start with an assumption, that in the geologic age in which the craters were formed, the moon was young and with a recently cooled crust having a temperature of 6,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Says Spurr: "internal fires, causing compressed incandescent rock and gas pressures, lifted and punched holes through the crust and squirted lava over the surface in typical volcanic eruption style but on a grand scale."

Says Baldwin: "asteroids, flying mountains moving on erratic courses through space, and meteoric masses of stone and iron collided with the moon, striking tremendously, because of their high velocity, made deep dents where the smaller ones hit and punctured the crust from the outside where the larger ones struck, thus providing a vent for the internal ocean of liquid lava. Mare Imbrium, the largest sea of lava on the moon, covers an area of one-third the United States. A flood of molten rock from a central point could cover this region in four days before it cooled sufficiently to set. When these floods of incandescent rock were spreading over the moon's surface, the moon was very much closer to the earth and its temperature of more than 6,000 degrees Fahrenheit would have made conditions extremely uncomfortable for an observer on earth."

Let's review the suppositions contained in these theories. 1. The surface temperature of the moon was 6,000 degrees Fahrenheit. 2. A flood of molten lava from a central point could cover the area of the Mare Imbrium in four days before it cooled sufficiently to set. 3. The moon was very much closer to the earth. 4. Meteoric rock and iron, and asteroids caused the craters. 5. Volcanic eruptions caused the craters.

May we ask a few questions? *Can* molten lava cool and set at 6,000 degrees Fahrenheit? Why exactly four days? Why not three, or five, or ten, or any other number? What evidence is there that the moon was very much closer to the earth at that time? How could these vast masses of rock and iron from space, plunging along at velocities of 12 to 35 miles per second, all strike the moon vertically? What about the tremendous long furrows, as much as 500 miles long, that could be caused by a glancing hit? Why no glancing hits?

Frankly, we don't believe either scientist has won the "battle of the moon." Neither had proved his point. Both, it seems to us, has incorporated fatal flaws in his theory.

May we picture what seems to be a more likely cause for the craters?

First, the moon was always exactly where it is now, at the same distance from Earth. Next, it may have been molten at one time, but not when the craters were formed—it had to be cool enough (semi-set) for the craters to remain craters when whatever caused them caused them. Finally, since there are no long gouges due to glancing blows, they *were* all vertical, direct hits. The "seas" of lava are only the areas not hit by masses from above, or subjected to volcanic activity from below. Thus, the moon's craters are formed partly from volcanic activity, and partly from hits from masses from above. The masses from above simply dropped (having been minor satellites of the moon, or something similar to Saturn's rings), or the new theory of the formation of planets being through giant vortex whirlwinds in space, is true, and the falling masses were just tiny "planets" formed by nearby "eddies" in space, with no orbital (around the moon) speed, so that they fell as they formed.

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THE GAMIN

By PETER DEXTER

She ruled with a small, brown hand as ruthless as the atom bomb that gave her a sterile existence—but still she was a woman, and love struck at her weak spot.

SOMETHING, the Gamin felt certain, waited inside that mysterious doorway, brooding, invisibly menacing. The Gamin didn't know what it was. She watched, wondering.

She stood before the wide opening in the side of the tunnel deep under the radioactive ruins of Chicago. She peered into the arched doorway, feeling afraid, wanting very much to know why this place was not like all the other gloomy, empty galleries beneath the crumbled city. Accident had brought her to this strange tunnel—accident abetted by the Gamin's insatiable curiosity.

The Gamin was a wild girl, a leader of one of the bands of wild, half-savage children who roamed the desolation that atomic war had made of Chicago. Five-feet two and thin as a whip, she was hard and lithe. Cunning, she could whip a knife into a foolhardy male quicker than thought, or blast an enemy with the little Colt revolver that she carried in the halter between her small hard breasts.

The Colt was trained now, on the center of that strange darkness.

"I can see you," bluffed the Gamin. "Come out of there or I'll put a bullet in you!"

An answering, inhumanly calm voice made her drop to the floor in panic.

"This is the time-chamber. It is protected from ignorant destruction. Unless you are a qualified person, you will be killed by the protective devices."

The Gamin lay as still as the deadly poisonous streets of Chicago far over her head. Finally she asked: "What's a time-chamber?"

Silence answered her, heavy, foreboding. The Gamin shifted impatiently.

"I can see you," she lied. "Come out of there!" She sighted over the Colt, trying to see something to shoot. She fired a tentative shot into the darkness. A light flashed on. After a moment the light went out.

Cautiously the Gamin crept forward and extended her hand beyond the threshold. The light flashed on blindingly again. She scuttled back-

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The Gamin stalked the sleeping queen like a tiger, creeping inch by inch on silent toes, her knife clutched tightly in one brown fist. Then, like lightning, she sprang upon her back, wrenched her head back by the hair—and slit the queen's throat.

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ward, crablike. The voice repeated:

"You will be killed by the protective devices." It was an unemotional, mechanical voice. The Gamin felt inclined to believe it. But her impatience and gnawing curiosity again got the better of her caution.

"Nuts to you," she murmured defiantly, and crept slowly over the threshold, her eyes darting around the brightly-lit metal-lined room. She pointed the gun instinctively exactly where her eyes searched. The little automatic .25 calibre Colt she had taken from a dead woman long ago. You could always find ammunition in the deserted stores on the surface. But you couldn't take long, or the atom-fire would get you.

"Now that you have entered," the Voice began, "I will tell you what you should know to stay alive in here. If you are ignorant of science, please go out again, or you will be killed."

"What's science?" asked the Gamin.

"If you are a qualified person of good intentions, pull the large red lever. If you are not such a person, to pull the lever will mean your death."

Seeing nothing to alarm her, the Gamin promptly pulled the large red lever on the big metal panel in the wall.

Things began to happen!

The metal panel opened to left and right, and a kind of living picture of an adult said: "I am not alive. I am an undying electronic brain set to guard this precious store of knowledge for the future. I will test you to ascertain if you are a fit person to take charge of this treasure for your people, those who may still live."

"Fit person," murmured the Gamin, crouching aside out of the line of sight of the eyes of the moving thing that was like an adult inside the big metal cabinet. She had seen moving pictures; the gang had one and some reels, but this . . . was different.

"Let me see you clearly," the mechanical brain ordered. She moved forward cautiously, stood directly before the thing.

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a boss." Proudly the Gamin stated it, the electronic monitor clicked; somewhere inside encyclopedic reference cards shuffled over notched wheels, the brain sighed gustily through its audio:

"Boss. That's good. What is your sex?"

"G—girl," said the Gamin, who didn't see why that mattered.

"What do you intend to do with this stored material if I open to you?"

"Snoop it," murmured the Gamin. "What the Hell d'ya think?"

For a long time the click and sigh of the machine went on. "Snoop" seemed not to have been included in its dictionary.

"Will you solemnly swear to protect this treasure of your race and bend every effort toward making sure that every remaining living person benefits by the work of their forefathers?"

"Swear?" The Gamin was puzzled. "Damn!" She winked at the machine,

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maybe that would help. "Damn it to Hell," she reaffirmed.

The clicks mounted briefly to a confused crescendo, and subsided.

"Very well," stated the machine. "Now I must ask you some questions to ascertain your intelligence quotient. If it is below a required standard, the doors will not be opened."

If the Gamin had known the series of lethal gas jets waiting for the mechanism to open their deadly flow into the chamber, she would have been a mile away by now. But she didn't exactly believe this thing was going to kill her. Curiosity, a woman's birthright, held her there before the mechanical judge.

"Telgence quotion," murmured the Gamin placidly.

"Exactly. If you had three children and could only feed one, what would you do?"

"Don't have any children. Don't want any. Nuts." The Gamin was not entertained.

"Please cooperate. Your life hangs in the balance, and this is important in other ways. Answer the question!"

"Get some food, you darn fool. Steal it, send other kids after it. What'ya think?"

"That is the correct answer. Now . . ."

"Now you listen to me! I can't spend a lot of time here, I've got to get back to the gang. Unless you've got something important for me, don't bother with this boloney!"

The machine clicked and whirred. The Gamin walked once around the big metal-walled room, noting that each panel was a potential door to wealth—if there were things stored in here, as the peculiar voice and image indicated.

"My compulsion is such that I must go on with the questions. I am trying to adjust myself to the changed mentality of men of your time. I am only an electronic brain, you know. Not a person. Please try and adjust your viewpoint to rationality."

"What's rationality?" asked the Gamin.

"You are potentially a rational being, or my compulsion would cease."

The eerie timelessness of the big room again pierced the Gamin's shell of self-confidence, and the chill of the brooding, waiting personality of that unliving thing behind the panels again brought strange fear to her.

Two puzzled minds peered at each other out of their time-separated environments, peered and tried to understand. The Gamin—and the brain of the time-lock. The machine completed its ponderous thought, said:

"Now tell me, female, if you were given the key to the libraries of the world that has passed away, containing all the records of that world, laboriously collected together to preserve them through the cataclysm of the atom-war; what would you do?"

"Take some books back to the gang. Ron reads 'em, Charlie reads 'em."

"But you do not. Well, my compulsion ceases. You must bring Ron and Charlie here to this place. Only literate persons can be considered for this important task."

The Gamin stood for a long time

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before the dark and silent screen. Then, feeling humiliated, she went silently out. She did not intend to let Ron and Charlie know where she kept her boat, or how to get in and out of the deadly radiation field of the city.

For a long time the Gamin puzzled over the hard words of the machine. It must mean that Ron and Charlie could have things she could not have because they could read. The Gamin resolved to learn to read. For only the most valuable things would be protected as these things were protected. The wonder of the mechanical brain was to the Gamin but another of the endless wonders of the city, to be puzzled about—not to understand.

She wanted that store of things for herself, and she wasn't going to tell anyone else about it.

An hour later, the Gamin parked her boat in the reeds, covering it with a spray of branches, and trudged up the trail to the hideout.

Ron, squatted beside the fire, lifted off the big stew kettle and ladled her out a portion. Today was his turn to cook.

"Listen, Ron, how much dyn'mite we got?" asked the Gamin, daintily stirring the dog meat and ship's biscuit, cooked together with dried canned vegetables.

"Six cases. 'Nough to blow us all to Hell. Why?"

"I ran into something big. Tell you 'bout it later."

"Tell me now."

"Nuts. Wanta see what's in there before you all get your hooks in it."

"Take me along, Gamin?"

"Naah! What for?"

"I kin lug the dyn'mite. What you got to lose? You're the boss, ain't-cha?"

The Gamin compared Ron's skinny form with the plump, attractive bodies of the men in the movie-pics the gang had salvaged. Ron suffered, for his freckled face, stringy arms and legs, and hunched over bearing were not exactly perfection.

The Gamin grunted. "Nah! This is one I do alone."

"You do 'em all alone. What'd you do if you got hurt in there. Who'd help you get out of the place?"

"Won't get hurt! Got to fix that thing first."

"What thing? What'ya mean, fix it?"

"Funny kind of living brain in a big metal room. Got to kill it. Taint safe till I do."

"Better take me along. It might kill you."

"Oh, hah! Fat chance! Not that. It's only an ole kind of a machine."

Ron, his mind on the graceful body and turbulent curls of the Gamin, watched her scoop up her food with capable hands. He reached out tentatively, stroked her shoulder and breast. The Gamin whirled, tugged out her knife with one smooth motion and slashed at him so fiercely that he fell over backward getting out of the way.

"Ah, Gamin," moaned Ron, "you know I like you! Why do you always try to knife me?"

"I'll knife anybody that touches

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me. You too!" She went calmly on eating her stew as if nothing had happened.

"Ain't no such thing as a livin' machine!" remarked Ron, picking himself up with a rueful expression.

"Well, if it ain't alive, it sure acts like it was. It's hard to tell you about."

"Whyn't ya show it to me? We could bring back lots more stuff, two of us."

"Nah! You'd tell everybody, and then when I go for something, it'd be gone. Wait till I get good and ready . . ."

The Gamin spent a full hour lugging two hundred pounds of dynamite t the door of the time-vault. Then she sat down for a rest.

Relaxed, her head back against the wall, she tensed to hear a slight sound. Down here there should be no sound—not like feet. Sounds like rats, yes . . . Her darting hand swooped to her little Colt. Her other hand half drew the eight-inch hunting knife from the sheath on her leg. She was sitting in the dark, her flashlight on the floor by her side. She did not make the mistake of throwing the beam about. It was one of those squeeze-the-handle lights, and they were scarce. The light itself could be the thing they wanted—would kill her to get.

Waiting, she fired instantly when a strong beam sprang from the dark, began to sweep toward her in search. The light went out. She moved silently three feet from her seat. They could fire at the flash of her gun.

She wasn't scared. She was mad. Then she heard a laugh, and Ron saying, "It ain't funny. She'll kill ya as quick as look at ya. I don't know what I let myself be talked into this for . . ."

A furious anger burned upward, made her muscles hurt with energy wanting to be unleashed. So it was her own gang. Trailing her, spying on her! She'd fix 'em.

In the boat, she had fused and capped several sticks. She picked one up, took a precious match, tried to figure how to light it without the fire showing.

From the dark came a voice—Charlie's—placating. "Listen, Gamin, we only wanted to know how you came in here. We knowed you used a boat. We got a boat, and followed you. Now we know where the big sewer entrance is. That's all. We ain't done nothing to you to be sore about. Now we're here to help you with this job. I wanted to see that living machine you told Ron about."

Jimmie and Ron added theirs: "We're with you, Gamin. Sure we are, only we got to see what's under here, too. You can't keep a whole city secret, you need us."

The Gamin had not been leader so long without learning the art of managing men by compromise and subterfuge. Being a woman, it came natural. She laughed.

"Pret' near plugged one of you. Why'nt you tell me what you want, 'stead of sneaking around after me like rats? I'd a brought you along."

She pumped the hand flash to full bright, swung it on their faces. They

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were crouched in a row on the floor, as low as they could get. She laughed again.

"Come on. This is the place, and I'll bet it's the best find we ever make. This is *something*."

Turning her back, the Gamin strode through the big vault door. The lights came on as before.

If her hips swayed just a trifle, why after all she was a girl, and these were her own followers watching. And if her bones shivered as she felt that eerie timeless essence of the machine-mind, watching and waiting, why the boys could not tell it from her hard calm.

She pulled down the big red handled lever, and the panel doors slid right and left, the man on the screen came to life, and the voice of the eerie mind started to talk—with the words that did not sound like words heard nowadays. They sounded smoother, smarter, as if he had done nothing but talk all his life. The Gamin didn't know it, but he had, before he died.

What she heard was only the opening record, and when *the mind* took over the conversation, only a child of the devastation could have missed the difference. The Gamin, even, knew there was a difference when the machine voice said:

"So you have come back?"

"Yes, I brought the boys. And I brought something else, too."

"Have them step in front of the screen. They must be interviewed."

"Ron, Charlie! Come close, get innerviewed."

"I understand you boys can read."

"Ron stuttered, "Yes . . . we have learned how."

In that case perhaps you can tell me something of what has been happening up above. After the great concussions of the atom bombs, I have sat here in darkness, waiting for such as you to come again."

"Must have been kinda tiresome." Charlie was being polite, he was just a little awed by this thing that was not alive, and yet was. He could sense it, "sorta in between the words," spinning, and clicking, and weaving complicated electrical fields in its synthetic thought.

"Are you really a living machine?" asked Ron. Curiosity had brought his freckled nose within an inch of the screen.

"Yes, but it won't help your examination to look at that screen. I myself am a delicate mechanism protected by many layers of steel and concrete."

The Gamin pricked up her ears, edged close. "How many layers?"

"Enough to resist an atom bomb. And that is plenty to protect me from that dynamite you brought."

The Gamin started, flushed. "How'd you know that?"

"I am equipped with very sensitive hearing devices. These I can shut off when in danger of concussion. With them I have followed some of your movements. Because you have kept it concealed, I deduce the burden you brought was an explosive."

Ron turned accusingly to his leader. "You shouldn't done it, Gamin. This is different. This thing is important. I read enough comic books

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to know that much."

The Gamin only tossed her head. "If I wanta blow it up, I blow it up."

Charlie said, "Not this thing, Gamin. He can tell us plenty. No use pretending we know any more than we need. We're only kids! We were only lucky the big ones didn't catch us and ship us off to school—or camp, or wherever they took the other kids."

The light in the screen went dark. But the voice went on: "That is the correct attitude. I can tell you much that you need to know. And when the time comes, I can open to you the doors of all the collected science of your ancestors. But that will take years of study on your part. I doubt that you have the capacity for it."

"Years!" Ron was startled. Study!"

"Bah," said the Gamin. "You see, he wants to make us go to school."

"Give him a chance," Charlie was curious, standing with his big shoulders hunched, half a head taller than the Gamin, nearly grown. His square face was filled with a hunger, an appetite, that wasn't for food. "I want to know a lot of things. Maybe this thing can teach us without having to get cooped up by the big ones."

The voice from the cabinet was not encouraging, but he was clicking a little faster. "I could teach you, and I will if I have to. But you had better get the big ones, as you call the adult population. They will know what to do better than you."

"Oh no!" The Gamin was vehement. "Not in our territory! We'll kill 'em if they show their faces here. We don't trust 'em. Too many bad ones. Besides, who wants to be bossed around all the time?"

"You might think about that yourself sometime when you ain't sleeping or telling us what comes next, Gamin." Charlie smiled, but his eyes didn't. "You're pretty handy with the bossy stuff yourself."

"Any time you don't like it you can leave . . ."

"I ain't leaving and I ain't liking it. You can be the boss, but you can't overdo it. Don't forget it! We been together since the bad days. We'll stick together."

The Gamin shut up. This wasn't her day, somehow. She just couldn't keep things in hand. Nervously she fingered her knife. But she couldn't do that to one of her own bunch. Not without a real reason. Not for a few words.

"Your judgment reveals fatal flaws. You are wild things, and the radioactives have done you no good. I doubt that even I could help you act like human beings."

"Ahh, shut up!" The Gamin wasn't liking it.

"Fatal flaws in judgment," the mind in the mech was making the note permanent on its cards and references, cross-indexing the note. "Wild people, belligerent, murderous and . . . cruelty to others . . ."

"See, he insults us!" She was not taking it. The Gamin threw a shot from her gun at the screen, still lit and showing a scene in a room, but no human figure. The screen flashed, went out.

Fiercely Charlie wrenched the gun from her.

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"This is one time you're not getting your way, Gamin! You just don't understand this."

"I'll kill you!" She struggled, kicking his shins. He set her aside easily, picked up her gun.

"You just broke the biggest find of my life. That's all you did."

The mechanical voice sighed, "Not broken. Thinking. The screen is not important. It can be fixed again."

"Not by us, it can't. And we don't want the older people knowing about us, either."

"If I recall rightly, women have always been noted for making trouble. And men for going on with it . . ."

"What the Hell good is he to us?" The Gamin hated the machine now.

"You're jealous of him. He's only a machine that thinks, somehow."

Jimmie made a remark that grated. "Gamin, I think you ought to see that Charlie could kick you out any time. But he likes you, lets you run him around by the nose. You ought to appreciate him."

Charlie grinned. "Yeh, you might appreciate me a little if you wasn't so stuck on yourself."

"Just how old are you children?" the brain clicked.

We don't know exactly. During the bad time, you couldn't keep track of the seasons, and we lost count. Maybe fourteen, maybe sixteen."

The Gamin stole to the doorway, picked up a fused stick of dynamite, lit a match. She turned around.

"Listen to me, Charlie and Ron. You can't boss me! I'm going to be boss of the gang. You know what I'm going to do?"

"No, Gamin, no! Don't light that stuff . . ."

"Used to be you kids were smaller than me, scared to steal food, scared to come into the city. I was the only one learned how to get in here through the sewers with a boat and bring back food that wasn't poison out of the underground. You did what I said then."

Charlie looked at the Gamin, holding the rapidly shortening match and the deadly stick of explosive. It was time to back water.

"Listen, Gamin, here's your gun." Charlie tossed it to her feet. "We'll do whatever you say."

The Gamin picked up her gun, let the match burn out. Steadily she held the little gun on Charlie's bare chest. Charlie was worried, he was panting like a dog.

"And now you're talking about getting the big people in. I found this mechanical mind and his time-vault. Well, you're not going to do it. We held this edge of the city for years. We'll keep on holding it, too. The adults ain't gonna cart us off to school and work. Nosirree."

"Women," sighed the mechanism. "I had heard they were intractible, dominating, impossible to predict. Strange, strange."

"Not half so strange as you," the Gamin was not liking this monster behind the steel panels.

Charlie had an idea. His square face brightened, he ran a hand through the uncut bush of his orange hair. "Listen, Gamin, I'm with you. We'll get Doc Molly. She'll know

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what to do about this. You couldn't bust in there with dynamite anyway. Only way to open this treasure is to coax it open. Doc Molly understands such things . . ."

The Gamin, whose face had worn the same look Charlie had seen on it the time she killed Skinny Martin, relaxed a little, and the gun point dropped just the shade of a hair. Charlie began to breathe normally.

"Okay. We'll go tell Molly. But don't get any more ideas you're telling me what to do! Since you were little kids I looked out for you. I ain't aiming on having you run me around by the nose now. I ain't stepping aside for you, Charlie! If you want to be boss, go get your own kids and start a gang of your own. Don't figure on pushing me aside. I'll kill you!"

"Aw, Gamin," Ron was weary of it. "You make such a fuss about things."

"I *like* being boss! I ain't turning into one of those poor hussys that cook and wait for the men like you read to me about. Not no man's making me into a woman! Not while I can shoot him!"

"Sure, sure, Gamin. We get it!"

The Gamin had got her name from Molly, who had taken care of her when she was too small to live without. It was Doc Molly who had told the Gamin to use the sewers going into the city, or the invisible fire would kill her. It was Molly who had made her well when she had ventured above ground on a trip into the city and got sick, afterward.

She liked to find the tunnels running from building to building. You couldn't travel any other way, under the hot zones. There was a heck of a lot of Chicago underground.

The Gamin did not know, nor care, that her dark, long-lashed eyes, short-cut black hair and alert, fine-featured face were attractive to the boys. That the boys wanted her was but a nuisance easily avoided with the point of her knife.

They pulled the boat out of the river by the ruin where the old woman hung out. A queer little hurt tugged at the girl's heart as they made their way up the weed-lined path, and into the dark doorway. Molly had wanted her to stay with her and be a woman. She still wanted her.

The old woman answered their knock.

That tug at her heart was suddenly a pain.

The face that greeted them was gray and lined, and she was bent over more than ever. She must have had a touch of the fire of the bombs, to get so old so fast. They didn't last long, if they got much of that.

The trio pushed into the room brazenly, and old Molly sat down in her reed armchair.

"What's the matter with you wildlings, now?" Her voice was cracked and irritated. There were red patches on her arms and on her face. The Gamin knew they meant burns. S'funny they showed up now, after all this time. Years. She must have been into the hot zone lately.

"We found something, Doc Molly.

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Something big. Maybe you can tell us what to do."

"I'm listening . . ." Molly turned her head away from them, where they stood in a line in front of her chair, to watch someone coming up the long concrete hallway. The someone, a girl, paused, leaned against the doorway, looking them over. Charlie and Ron shuffled to their feet.

A strange fury boiled suddenly in the Gamin at their evident awe of this strange female. Her hand went to her knife haft, and she glared hate at the girl.

"Friends of yours, Doctor?" The voice was mocking, as if they were too insignificant and untidy to be friends of anyone. A cool, trained, educated voice. They knew the kind. She was one of the adults that collected stray kids like themselves for the schools and camps.

Molly answered slowly, "This is Annette Field, children. She is a young doctor, come to me to study conditions on the rims of the hot zone of Chicago. Do not be afraid of her, she will not squeal on you."

The woman clasped her hands together suddenly with delight, stooped to look into their faces on the level. "Real wild ones, Molly? I'm fascinated! I am! They look so capable, so fierce! Not at all like wild children, more like . . ."

Gangsters, Annette. Exactly. I have been their friend, they like me. Remember, Annette, you are not living in the world of your school books, this is the world of the devastation. These are that world's humans. Better understand them before you get so fascinated."

Molly turned back, went on:

"Pay no attention to her, Gamin. She knows nothing about us or anything else but her schooling. She is harmless."

The Gamin stared venomously at her blonde, combed and perfectly done-up hair; at her creamy white skin, with the little pink flush so perfect on her cheeks; at the clean, smooth hands she was clasping before her ecstaticly; and the laundered blue smock, stockings without holes, shoes that fit. She sneered: "She looks harmless. I will trust you, Molly. But not her. She must go before we talk."

Molly waved her hand to the young woman, and she went reluctantly, turning twice in the hallway to look back. When she was gone Charlie started: "We found . . ."

"Shut up!" The Gamin wasn't having it. "I found it, Molly. A thing called a time-vault. It has a mind in it that talks to us, asks us questions, tells us to get adults. We don't want the big people in here chasing us, Molly. But we want the things in that time-vault!"

The Doctor half-raised in her chair, for an instant a light of youth and idealism flamed on her face. "The time-vault! I remember when it was planted there. The electronic brain they built with such difficulty. The first mechanical brain that approximated human thought. A marvel! It still works, you say?"

"It doesn't think much of us," murmured Ron, looking out the one high window at the pale yellowish sky.

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"We don't want to break it getting in," said Charlie. "The Gamin wanted to dynamite it, but we coaxed her to see you first."

"Dynamite wouldn't hurt it. You could never get in."

"What are we gonna do with it?" The Gamin was impatient. She wanted the things she knew were in there. It was one of the few pleasures of her life, finding new things to interest her in the endless storehouses under the empty city. It was her biggest pleasure.

"Better forget it, Gamin." The old woman smiled at the lithe, pugnacious girl, noting the dirt on her bare legs, the torn split skirt, ending midway of her thigh. "There aren't a hundred men on the continent to whom its contents would be useful. You would find nothing in it that you want, believe me."

"Well, what does the brain make such a fuss about?" The Gamin was not convinced.

"The brain was built to guard the wisdom of the world from people like you, Gamin. It contains the whole thought of the dead race who preceded the atom-war. There are few men now alive who could benefit by it. But it must be guarded for the future."

"Future," mused the Gamin. "T'Hell with the future. I want to see what's in it!"

Annette had cheated. She had listened from the hallway, where she had stolen quietly back unnoticed. Now she could not contain herself. She stormed into the room, her face flushed with anger, with righteous indignation that the Gamin should contemplate destroying the treasury of the past.

"You shan't touch it, you little tart! I'll have men here in a week, men with degrees—and guns. The idea of a person like you . . . "

The Gamin's face turned cold as lead, and she crouched as though the big, healthy medical student had struck her. Her hand darted to her breast, and the little gun seemed to appear suddenly in it like sleight-of-hand. The black hole in the barrel hypnotized Annette with its sudden, deadly menace. The Gamin's voice was like little dead twigs breaking, small and brittle and coated with frost. "You have to have it, I guess. Back up against the wall."

Old Molly raised her hand in an ineffectual gesture, saying "No! No, Gamin, No!"

Charlie threw his cap on the floor with disgust. "Now we'll have to take her with us or kill her. She'll call the big people!"

Ron, who liked the clean attractive face of Annette, put in a cautious word. "She can cook for us, Gamin. No use bumping her off, long as she can work."

"Watch her all the time? Oh, no, she'd be nothing but trouble for us. Keep a guard up nights so she didn't sneak off? I say we gotta bump her off."

"Better knuckle, quick," murmured old Molly. "Say you'll do anything, not try to escape . . . "

"Shut up, Molly." The Gamin was debating this thing. Maybe with this nice female around the boys wouldn't

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be always trying to make her. Save her a lot of unnecessary watchfulness, of near-arguments.

Annette, frozen with fear of the sudden deadly venom in these wild children, managed: "Oh, please! I'll do anything you want . . ."

"Sure you will, pretty girl," the Gamin sneered, her handsome face turning into a cartoon of unwholesome viciousness.

Charlie saw one bright side of the situation. "She's a doctor too, Gamin. She can fix us up when we need it. And we're liable to need it, with the Woppos on the south side trying to move in all the time."

"She'd save us having to make this trip to Doc Molly's. We'd have our own doctor. Pretty classy, eh?" Ron was trying . . .

All eyes on that gun barrel noted its slight deflection and droop with relief. The Gamin had decided.

"You say leave the time-vault alone, it wouldn't do us any good. All right, Molly. But if you do anything about the big people, if you call them for this Annette of yours, we *will* bump her off."

"I won't betray you, Gamin. But try and be the girl I wanted you to be, *my* girl" . . .

"Ah, nuts."

The two boys backed out of the room, waited outside. Annette, obedient to the waved gun barrel, came next. After them came the Gamin, and the old woman hobbled to the door, watched them out of sight. Annette was now a chattel. She had plenty to learn.

Molly sat down, held her head in her hands. What could she do? There was no way she could call for help, and that help was apt to be worse than the need. There was nowhere to turn. Annette's visits from school had long been her only contact with the devastated world.

There was no mail. No telegraph office. No messenger service. Nothing, nothing!

The time-vault! The electronic brain which had received almost as much publicity at the time as the impending war with the Slav Federation that had succeeded the Communist regime. The sealing of the vault even as the first bombs began to burst on San Francisco, on Seattle, working swiftly east. One day, one terrible day of fear and flight and flame, and there was no radio news, no newspaper, no nothing. Since then, there had been occasional contact with worn pilgrims of the wastes that were left. Some little she knew of the society that had sprung up after the bombs had destroyed all the values they were fighting for, and the war had stopped for lack of direction or purpose. No one knew absolutely whether their attacker had won or had himself been wiped out by the counter-attack. People only knew that wherever they turned for direction, for government, there was none. Years had gone by, the "New" United States had sent men to round up the wild children. They had not been good men, not wise, not careful or considerate. And some of them had died from the wild kids' resistance. The Gamin's had been one embryo

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gang that had survived. Molly, once a successful doctor, lived now in the still standing portion of a ruined hospital. There was no world of man to work for. She sat and waited, and there was only the wild kids to work for, to heal and advise and to love. Years, it seemed. They trusted her, had grown to their skinny youth and wild independence around her. But they were not civilized. They were savage in spite of all her work.

Doc Molly brewed a pot of tea. What else was there to do? Radioactive sterile, the Gamin must be, to be so ruthless a girl.

The Gamin stood again before that dark, mysterious, awesome, infinitely luring doorway of the time-vault. In the vault she pictured the loot of a world now dead. The best, one of everything that the mighty dead owned, all collected together here—for her alone!

One thing she hoped was in there was an electric train toy. She had always wanted one that ran, she had seen only broken ones. She did not know they would not run because the power lines were dead. Another thing she knew must be in there, and that she wanted desperately to own, was a motorboat. She got very tired pulling the oars on her lonesome excursions into the sewers of Chicago. The concussions of the atom bombs had smashed all the boats. There were but a few which had been protected by some freak of blast shielding. And these were rowboats.

But above these little desires bouncing in her brain like bright bubbles of luring fire, was the desire to own that electronic brain, dominate it, make it think and plan for her, reduce its omniscient, automatic pride and scorn of her to a pitiful obedience.

Coming along the big tunnel before the door of the time-vault was a weird procession. These were a people with power and things unknown to the Gamin, and she crawled into the deepest shadows, trembling with the awful fear of the unknown. For it seemed to her these must be people who had died, come from their graves to punish her for trying to break open the time-vault.

In the front came four plump gentlemen carrying long ornate weapons such as Gamin had never seen. After them came a man with a trumpet, and after them came eight litter bearers. The litter itself was enclosed with curtains, but the curtains were caught up with a gold cord, so that she saw inside a young woman of her own age. She lay in a negligent pride and luxurious consciousness of power. After the litter came eight other litter bearers, carrying the rear shafts. After them came a double line of what the Gamin knew were soldiers. They wore green uniforms, decorated with gold insignia, and they carried likewise arms strange to her. After them came a double line of female slaves, and after them came a double line of male slaves, and of these there seemed no end, hundreds filed on and on and out of sight beyond the turn of the great tunnel.

All this was mystery to the Gamin,

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but she did not know that this was mystery to every other dweller on the blasted surface of the Earth.

The litter was set down before the wide doorway of the time vault, and the occupant stepped out. The Gamin started, surprise freezing her, for as near as she could see, this strange female was as like herself as a sister. A little fuller-fleshed, a little less hard of muscle, but very like herself, short and lithe and hard of mouth.

Her foot, in a golden sandal of peculiarly intricate lacing and ornamentation, reached out across the threshold, and the light inside flashed on blindingly, for the cavavan carried only soft glow-lights of a mysterious kind.

The Gamin admired the woman's possession, for she did not flinch or start, only stood still a moment while her eyes adjusted, then strode inside, her carriage erect and very proud, her head and eyes completely ignoring and contemptuous of the lesser ones about her.

After her filed the others, on softly sandaled feet that slithered dry and quiet on the stone. The Gamin was frozen with effort not to make a sound, for they were all about her, and discovery was almost inevitable.

She was filled with a fierce anger, all the more intense because she knew it was futile. This stranger from nowhere was going to loot the time-vault on which she had set her own desire! No one was near her . . . except . . .

Except the four who had preceded, who were bearded men of a good six feet in height, very erect and spruce in new clean uniforms, such military spruceness as the Gamin had not known existed except in the old pictures of the times before the atom-war. These four took up posts about the litter, their weapons ready in their hands, and watching on all sides. Gamin craned out of her shadows, trying to see what was going on inside.

There was a great activity, and after a short time, the slaves, their light chains clinking musically together from neck to neck, began to file out, each with some article which gave the Gamin, for each one, a twinge of deep regret that she did not have the power and the means of entering the vault.

There were models of mechanisms, there were stack after stack of round film packs, there were intricate toy-like constructions, there were wide books almost too heavy for a man to carry.

These slaves began to form a line which extended back into the shadows where the Gamin crouched, and suddenly one of the slaves gave a little cry as her foot came down upon the Gamin's ankle.

Instantly one of the guards ran back, flashing a brighter light into the shadows, and seeing the Gamin white-faced and crouching, caught her by the arm and twisted her to her feet painfully. Seeing red, and her reflexes too automatic for her caution to control, the Gamin whipped her knife out and slashed at his throat. But the blade caught in the gold metal of a collar ornament and he gave her a heavy cuff on the face

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that brought her to her knees, the knife falling on the stone, the blade ringing in her ears where it struck with a sound of gloom.

Quickly his hard hands went over her body, finding her hidden gun and tossing it aside. Then he dragged her, struggling futilely against his adult strength, into the chamber of the time-vault.

The sleek creature who resembled herself was seated before the open panel of the Vault Mind, talking to it with a vaunting ring of mockery. A little square stool of wood had been set.

"Your brain is not even a brain, it did not know we existed, it thought to stop us—we who have defeated the armies of the whole world, and laid waste other worlds besides this one."

The soldier who had captured the Gamin threw her to the floor in front of the stool where she sat, and held his singular weapon pointing down at her. The Gamin peered up fearfully at the smooth, mocking face, noting the firm, pink flesh, the painted cheeks, the darkened eyebrows, the full breasts and supple body all revealed by a gown of glass-like transparency and complete softness of unwoven texture. No, this woman did not look like her own virgin self, the Gamin decided. She was another kind of female.

"What have we here, Gabril?" she asked, her voice not even raised by the occurrence.

"O your mightiness, it is a wild girl, one little spy lying in the shadows. You know as much as I about her. She tried to knife me when I seized her . . ."

The woman leaned forward, her tone half mocking, half commiserating. "And she drew blood with the knife, too, I note. Do women now seek your life, Gabril? That is very strange!"

Gabril laughed with her, but the look he bent upon the Gamin was stark with anger.

"Shall I kill her and throw her into the sewer water?"

"First we must know more about her. She has a vague resemblance to someone I know."

"She resembles a water-rat to me!"

"That is an insult, Gabril! Any fool could see she is enough like me to be a twin."

"Like you? Impossible, your mightiness."

"Why are you here, little wildness?" The woman bent forward, looking closely at the Gamin, who lay within two feet of her face, between her and the open panels of the mind.

The Gamin had the sense to play dumb. "I search for food stores, please."

"Not a spy of the Westerns, then?"

"What are Westerns?"

"Where do you live?"

"Outside the hot-zone, on the river bank."

"Now that you have seen us, do you know what will become of you?"

The Gamin did not answer, only looked up appealingly, playing the part of an ignorant child, as she had before when she ran into adult interference.

"Chain her up with the other wom-

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en, Gabril. And do not beat her yet. I myself will have the pleasure of her first discipline."

"It would be no fun for me. I would say she was a sterile, hit in her childhood by the fission rays."

"Another insult, Gabril. You are playing with stupidity lately, a very poor courtier indeed. She is too young to know yet."

Gabril, his face a deep red of embarrassment and humiliation, led the Gamin roughly away to the line of women, snapped a thin steel circlet about her neck. The Gamin found herself one of a line of chained women, and fury boiled futilely within her so that the whole scene became a horrible prelude to her imagined revenge upon these inconceivable people.

"Some day," murmured the Gamin, "I will get back at her . . . I will fix her for this . . . I'll fix her!"

At long last the sleek, proud "Mightiness" came striding smoothly out, mounted into her litter with utter grace, managing somehow to convey to every eye her contempt of that eye. "Three minute fuse," she murmured to Gabril, who stood to help her into the litter.

Gabril paled, whirled and began to bark orders. The litter lifted, swung away, and the long lines of slaves began to shuffle their feet in time, anxious to get in the necessary rhythm to avoid painful tugs on the thin neck rings.

The Gamin, loaded down now with a sack of hard and heavy objects, stumbled after the sharply tugging chain at her throat, understanding now how slaves were managed. It was impossible not to follow that chain, the weight of a hundred moving humans making it rigid as a wall the instant she was not in exact accord with their movements. She caught the knack of avoiding the painful shock of the ring about her throat after a minute, moved off past the time-vault door in step with the others.

They had been moving but for two minutes when a tremendous concussion flung half of them to the pavement. Looking back, the Gamin saw flames and dust-clouds billowing from the time-vault, filling the tunnel, billowing toward them. Picking herself up quickly, she shouldered her bag, was ready when the line moved on. Strangely, her biggest regret was that another had managed the job she had wanted to do, loot the time-vault the adults held so precious.

Her wits were racing to understand this thing, who these people were, what they meant to her.

To the thin, bent woman-form ahead of her the Gamin addressed a question: "Who are these people who have chained me?"

The woman turned a pale, hopeless face to the Gamin, and said one word: "Devils!"

The Gamin started at the intensity of hatred in her voice, but she said no more. The march went on and on, hour after hour, and the Gamin, hard and tough as she thought she was, was stumbling to keep up with the longer steps of her companions. Still on they went. The original tunnel

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of the time-vault had opened through a blasted wall of cement into an even bigger, singularly polished and perfectly circular boring, which led down at a steady grade. The air was chill, and the Gamin shivered as the chill increased.

Old Molly, watching the days drag by, worried about the girl Annette. She had come to her, off and on, since she was little. Molly had helped with her medical studies.

During vacations from the big school which had escaped destruction, went on someway, operating on a cooperative basis, raising their own food, Annette had told her many tales of the school's fight to stay in existence, of the barbed wire and timber barricade about the grounds, manned day and night by riflemen to beat back the marauding, starving hordes of refugees from the cities. It was a horrible thing to Molly's ears, the dying remnants of the city population, their hair whitened with the radioactive blasts most of them had survived, only to learn that they were doomed by the slow death of radioactive poisoning. These masses of slowly dying people roamed the countryside, stealing and murdering or just begging and starving, and as their numbers were decreased by death, their savagery and ruthless custom of killing anyone who opposed them grew, until no home or hamlet but was surrounded by stockades against the "poisoned people." Latter years these had disappeared entirely, to be replaced by more organized bands of hardy, healthy but piratical looters of the ruins and farms, roaming from clean zone to clean zone, retreating again along the edges of the hot zones of radioactive areas.

Fearing for the girl plunged into this barbarism of starving, hunting people, at the mercy of chance and the Gamin's whims, old Molly at last summoned her slim strength and made ready to search her out and try to rescue her.

The aging Doctor knew only that the Gamin's camp lay near the river's edge, and her only guide was her experienced eyes, for she knew the camp would be well hidden. Carrying a package of home-made bread and canned goods on her back, the old woman stumbled along the water's edge, making long detours to get past the ruined piers and warehouses of the waterfront.

Ceaselessly she examined the places where a boat might be pulled up and hidden, for she knew they used a boat to get about, and that the Gamin went into the city in a boat. She would never have found them, was passing a brush lined little brook that babbled into the river by wading, when she heard a cheerful "Doc Molly" from the depths of a thicket.

Out of the shielding branches the freckled imp face of Ron was thrust, and his grimy hand waved at her.

"S'too hot to be gaddin' about, Doc. Did you want some help?"

To Molly the sound of the boy's voice rang with an especially pitiful high, sexless pitch. She knew that most of these wild kids had had just enough of the emanations of the

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bomb products to be infertile, sexless —and to her it was one of the greatest horrors of the aftermath of the atom-war that so many survivors were doomed to a life without pleasure or love or any but a colorless eunuchoid succession of days without meaning.

Ron himself had a sensation of pity to see the red spots of burn on the old woman's flesh, which remained still from her days of tending the casualties in the worst areas of the stricken cities, before their complete abandonment had been known to be necessary. Pity for her bent back and dried up face, for the wisps of white hair under her straw hat, the sunken cheeks and toothless mouth. Two poor abandoned humans looked at each other with understanding and pity.

"How is Annette?" asked Molly, unable to finesse for anxiety.

"She's fine. She was just getting ready to go and see you. The Gamin disappeared, and Charlie is running things now. He told her she might as well get along, he didn't intend to keep her unless she wanted to stay."

"Take me to her, Ron." The boy's words did not register fully; when they did she asked: "The Gamin disappeared? I wonder what happened to her?"

"She must have met somebody bossier than herself, Charlie says. Charlie makes a swell chief, Doc."

"Of course. You're better off with him."

"The Gamin takes everything so serious, you don't know what's going to strike her wrong next. I was scared of her."

"Of course, child. She has a typical domination reflex from a feeling of inferiority. Such people are always hard to live with. I could not change her, hard as I tried."

"She had to boss everything we did, or else we couldn't do it. Girls," said the boy disgustedly. "I'm glad Annette's going, too. I'm sick of girls around all the time."

"I hope sometime soon you change your mind about girls," murmured Molly, her heart touched again. There had been sterile children in the old days, but that had been due to accidental and occasional subjection to unnoticed radiation, and not due to man's own planning to wipe himself out. Now there were steriles everywhere. Molly wondered what the population would be when the first census was taken by the first real government. About one person to ten square miles, she guessed.

All the time they were threading their way through a maze of bushy growth, in and out. This unseeable path was their protection.

They came out into a little bedraggled clearing, where some two dozen teen-agers sat or lay asleep.

"It used to be a lot dirtier," murmured Ron as Molly drew back from the camp's overstrong smell, "but Annette made them clean up after the Gamin didn't come back."

The girl came from the big tent with the sides rolled up for the heat, running with her arms spread and her golden hair flying. She threw herself into Molly's old arms with a glad cry.

Both of the women cried a little,

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while the boys sat still and unmoving, watching them. There was a threat in their silence, and Ron talked to cover it up . . .

"Charlie's out hunting dog with a couple of the fellows, he'll be back before long. You better stay here tonight, Molly; you can't make it back alone. We'll take you back in the morning; it'll be safer."

From dugouts along the rim of the clearing peeked several grimy girls' faces, shy as wild creatures, and Molly noted the bruises of a beating upon one of them. Molly looked Annette over.

"Are you all right, girl?"

"Fine, Doctor. Everything has been rather thrilling. It's an experience I wouldn't have missed. There is something vital about being up against raw nature, real natural life . . . Charlie has been a gentleman all the way through."

"You're lucky," commented Molly, looking hungrily at her youth, blooming in her so strong and fresh it was discouraging to her old self.

"This is hardly what I would call natural life," Molly went on, looking at all the small savage details, the cooking fires with forked sticks in the ground, the too-near pile of opened tin cans stinking, the bones of the slain dogs that were, apparently, a staple, and hanging over it all a cloud of flies and an aura of hopeless joylessness, of waiting for something that was not ever coming.

"There is a certain freedom from all adult restraint which makes it very—don't care, hurray for Hell—you understand?"

"Kids have always liked to camp, and though these kids are pushing adulthood, still I suppose they enjoy it."

"They have only the vaguest of ideas about any other kind of life. They were all so very young at the time of . . ."

"Man's last mistake," supplied Molly.

"I can't think what could have happened to the Gamin. I was beginning to get under her shell and find the human being, when she made one of her trips and didn't come back."

Molly nodded darkly. "I think I know where to find her. Maybe the boys will take us there."

"To the time-vault?"

"Of course; where else? She was fascinated by it. That's really why she took you away. So that no one should learn of it."

"It's a shame she should have grown up that way. She seems to have so much, yet . . ."

"She's an utter savage, an embryonic tyrant of the worst kind. Yes. It is my theory that the tyrant type of mind is brought about, among other causes, by sterility. The atomic radiations caused sterility in many children. We will be lucky if some wild, bloody fool does not make himself an Empire out of the wreck of our country."

"Somebody like the Gamin, with a will fixed hypnotically upon domination of others?"

"Somebody like the Gamin. If not her, another. I think that the body itself, faced with a life without excitement, due to its sterility, makes

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the compensations which bring about the reactions of excitement when bossing other people. That is, if the tendency is there, sterility helps it along by failing to provide other outlets for energy."

"I think I know what you mean. The historic Hitler, whom my teachers often speak of as the precursor of the atom war, was such a sterile type, was he not?"

"He was definitely not normal. I don't know in what direction his abnormality lay, but it was certainly not toward virility, or masculinity!"

"Here we stand talking, and you must be starved and worn out."

It was the next day before Molly could put her plan for visiting the time-vault into effect.

Then, Charlie and Ron volunteered to see the two women to their home in the wrecked hospital. But after they had left the camp and there was no one to hear but the two boys, Molly put it up to them, explaining that she thought the Gamin had gone there and was perhaps injured, unable to return alone.

So it was that they approached the scene of the Gamin's capture; unaware of the change.

"Someone's really blasted it," cried Ron, his freckles hopping on his nose with boyish excitement. "She sure is torn to Hell."

Molly looked at the gaping hole in the wall where the time-vault had been. In her heart her hope for the future of man was dying. Some one had looted, some idiot had destroyed the last complete repository of man's knowledge. The dying thing in her heart gave a last gasp and went out. When such blows could still fall, there was no hope!

They went over the wrecked chamber with the utmost care, noting each burst compartment, looking for any vestige of the treasure that might have been overlooked. There was nothing that had not been destroyed.

"The brain itself . . ." wondered Molly. "Do you suppose it was better protected—that it might lie there unharmed beneath the rubble, still in working order?"

Charlie and Ron obligingly rooted in the place where the panels to the brain had been, found only the broken ends of wires. Molly examined these with care, forlornly hopeful, and twisted the torn ends together in various combinations. Her success startled her so she almost fell.

"Friends, you come too late! The enemy has been here." The Brain was speaking from his cell deep in the concrete, placed there so that no least vibration could disarrange him. He had survived!

Molly laughed hysterically. Then she calmed. "Can you tell us who did this to you?"

"Yes, I can. It is a people from another planet, with a power unknown to men, even of the time before the atom bomb. They came to the Earth many years ago in great flying ships. In the year known to you as 1947, many more of them came. Men saw them then, and called them 'flying saucers' and decided they were illusions—all but a few intelligent persons with imagination.

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One little magazine of the time printed the whole story, with pictures, but the stupid army leaders decreed the whole thing was illusion—and humanity lost its chance to overcome a menace which is now too strong for you to fight."

The voice of the brain was sad.

"Now these people have constructed huge caves inside the Earth and set up a civilization that I fear will bring man into its chains as slaves for thousands of years . . ."

"I don't understand," said Molly, confused.

"It is very simple. These people remained underground while we fought the atom war and destroyed our civilization. Now they have come to the surface in numbers, with many slaves, many soldiers, and have taken away all the science knowledge that was stored here. All the rest they blew up and burned to cinders. If I had not been so especially protected beneath so many feet of concrete, I would not be here any longer."

"Did you notice the Gamin?"

"The wild girl was here and was taken captive by one who is potentially far more destructive than herself."

Molly turned to the boys. "This brain must be watched over by you carefully. He must be your oracle and your leader, your God, for he is one of the last wise minds left on earth."

Charlie said: "I am beginning to understand a great deal I didn't before. Annette has been working on me, Doc, and I am a different boy nowadays. I'm going to do *the right thing*! I can use the brain's advice, and I can protect him. I will, too!"

"The destroyers will not return. Eventually the sane people will contact me, if there are any still alive on Earth. Then, Charles, you will have done your work as a man to save the lore of the past." The brain was talking direct to the boy. Charley was listening with an awed, worshipping expression.

The Gamin, unused to strenuous labor, felt like lying down and dying on the spot. The sack of books had not seemed heavy at the start, but now it weighed down on her sweating shoulders like a mountain. Her feet shuffled automatically after the feet ahead, and her eyes were unable to rise above those feet for weariness.

The chain at her neck tugged inexorably, painfully on and on, and follow she must. She knew that whoever her captors were, they were not taking her to "school." This was worse.

In a big chamber lined with wide metal shelves, upon which all manner of gadgets reposed side by side with stack after stack of books, she dropped her burden at last, straightened with a groan. Again they filed out and downward, at last the big, spruce guards unlocked their unpleasant necklaces, and the Gamin found they were in a huge dormitory filled with doubledecked beds, and the chill of the place somewhat reduced by the human occupants of the beds.

"I'm hungry," the Gamin remarked to the guard unlocking her chain. Her voice came out as rusty as old iron.

"You'll eat when it's time. Behave,

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or you'll really be in for it. The Boss, doesn't like the way the Queen criticized him because of you."

"The Boss is the big gump who captured me, eh?"

"Yes, take my advice and keep out of his way." The Guard grinned. Even in her utter weariness the Gamin was still handsome. The devil-take-you look of her eyes intrigued the man. The Gamin, knowing that her old independence would not be sense just now, managed to smile back, though affection was the farthest thing from her thoughts. She had used her sex before to influence men; maybe she could use this man's friendliness.

The days went by, full of work and only work. In the morning she went chained to work, at night she was unchained and shackled to her bed. The anticipation of an escape attempt died a sickly death, and a hopeless knowledge of the futility of any plans possessed her. She could not understand any fact of her present environment as yet.

She did not even know what was going on, why all the work was necessary, nor what these endless rows of machines and weird chambers full of incomprehensible lights and dials and levers and glittering protective barriers of metal grilles. The Gamin had no way to know just what place she was in, nor that none of this was known to ordinary men. For the Gamin knew only enough letters to write her name, to puzzle out the words in an old comic book, or read the caption of a picture on some long unused marquee.

So it was that the Gamin was not bothered with awe or overestimation of the nature of these people into whose hands she had fallen.

When the "Queen" summoned her, the Gamin went, not expecting anything but questioning, and why she should be bothered was beyond her.

The utter luxury of the woman's quarters struck her with embarrassment. She was unwilling to touch foot to the thick carpets, or move quickly for fear of breaking something.

The woman who had startled her with her resemblance to herself was waiting.

Sleek, perfumed, well-fed, her groomed near-naked body made the Gamin furious. The Gamin needed bathing, the sweat of a week's labor clung to her, her clothes were the same old rags she had worn when captured, except for the addition of a thin gleaming strand of wire welded tight about her wrist, upon which was a tag with her name and date of capture.

"And how do you like our hospitality, little wild girl?" asked the lordly one, wriggling with humorous consideration of the Gamin's expression, a mingled misery, anger, and weariness covered over with an attempt to appear stupid, for the Gamin knew better than to appear dangerous unless there was an opportunity to be effectively so.

"I am not used to work, whatever-your-name-is."

"You will get used to it, unless you are very lucky. We have great plans,

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and there will be much work. But I have been considering another sort of job for you. The only thing is, you may be too stupid to fill it. Tell me, is that dull expression on your face real or feigned?"

The Gamin did not answer. Whatever-her-name picked up a long-lashed whip from beside her chair, flicked the Gamin with it so that a drop of blood sprang out on her arm. The Gamin saw red, clenched her fists, but controlled herself.

"Better answer, little fool. To you my name is "Your Majesty," and don't forget it again. Now answer me!"

"I am pretending to be stupid," murmured the Gamin, wearily deciding that if there were a better lot to be had by being clever, she had no desire to miss it by mistaken acting.

Along the side of the room three older women, with the slave wires on their arms, stood waiting. "Her Majesty" signed to these women.

"Make her up to look like me, I have an idea how to avoid some of the labor of being a queen. There are times a double could be useful around here, particularly when we are arguing with the Westerns."

Bobbing their heads, these women took the Gamin away and began a long process of cleaning her, perfuming her, painting her face and cutting her hair, then dressing her in strings of jewels and filmy gauze in the same manner as their queen. When they had completed the job, they led her back into the chamber where the queen waited, idly playing with the dials of a huge machine the Gamin did not understand.

A tall pier glass filled one end of the chamber, and the slaves stood the Gamin here before the glass. The queen stood up languidly, moved toward the Gamin with her sleek cat stride and mocking way—and the Gamin, looking into the glass, gasped at the fact that they were almost identical.

The queen turned her around and around, exclaiming: "Except for the tan on her hide, and the scars and callouses on her feet and legs, except for the lean muscles on her, she might be me! Very well, take her to my slave-keeper. She is not to work, and every day she is to practice walking like me, talking like me, dressing like me. She is to practice assiduously. Have the best food to fill her out. And tell him above all, to have her try to act like a woman, even if she is not!"

The Gamin bridled at her tone, but was not offended at the words, for she had never particularly desired to be considered feminine. The Gamin had never heard of the sword that hangs by a thread over the head of rulers, did not know that her new job was one apt to prove perilous. She only knew that the disgusting cleaning work she had been doing was a thing of the past. Her weary mind could not grasp exactly what had happened to her.

The days passed and the Gamin became well acquainted with her voice teacher; with her dancing master; as well as with the slave-keeper. Likewise she became acquainted for the first time in her life with good

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food and plenty of it. She began to look much more like a woman and less like a lean-muscled boy.

The Gamin had to be equipped with a working knowledge of politics for her role as the queen's double. She was very surprised to learn that the vanished race of man in the cities above had been considered, when they existed, as less than human. That now the earth above them was to return to an earlier state of forested beauty in which the invaders from space could hunt and roam without fear of discovery.

To the Gamin, these people with whom she was taught to mingle as an equal were a lazy lot. They seemed to do nothing the livelong day but entertain themselves with parties, gatherings where the most peculiar things went on, to which the Gamin could not accustom herself. She developed a lanquid air of unconcern to cover her ignorance and her aversion to much of this entertainment. Love making was a subject for which the Gamin had the greatest repugnance, as well as wonder as to just what people saw in it. The Gamin did not know she was a sterile, or that her attitudes were not normal in this field of human relations.

During this period of her training, it became clear before her that she was to act as the queen during those necessary functions which the queen found boring. No thought in her hard little mind was her own any more. She was now but a kind of dress dummy for this queen, a mockery at which the queen's friends laughed as she played the great lady in court functions, a mockery which she felt keenly but which she had to accept as she accepted her pallet and chains at night.

"Queen Hermina, your royal lowness," they would jibe her.

That her heretofore sleeping mind, now exposed to endless new and stimulating experiences, was blossoming and growing into a new and fully developed character, was hidden from her by the strict exigencies of her days, the endless dressing and undressing, the preening and practice at pronouncing words she had never heard before, the contact with keen minds before which she had to play her part consummately or lose her immunity from hard labor.

There came the day when the Gamin was ready, and Queen Hermina had her dressed especially regally, saying to her:

"You are to preside at a banquet given the ambassadors from the far east, from China. You will not need to worry, for they do not speak English well. The interpreters have been instructed, and will translate whatever you say into words appropriate. You will save me endless boredom this night, and I will be grateful. Try hard, little wild girl!" Hermina favored her with one of her rare smiles that managed to be so *not* gay, tinged as they were with a kind of cruel disregard of the humanity of the object smiled at.

The Gamin, now Hermina, was led to the great ballroom, and stood aghast before the horde of decorated dignitaries, their sleek chests shining

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with medals, their hands, their ankles, even, glittering with jewels, and their faces fixed in frozen smiles of official gayety. Upon their heads were little flat three cornered hats. The Gamin did not know they were Mongolian headgear, and anyway they swept them off at her appearance, did not again put them on.

To the Gamin, sitting at the head of the sagging board, loaded with every savory dainty and plied with every known wine, the banquet was a dizzy whirl of impossible people all glaring at her and smiling with impossibly wide, fixed grins, all talking with gabbling incomprehensible sounds, and all busily putting things to their mouths. She talked only to the interpreter at her side, standing just off her left arm and talking steadily into her ear. He told her who to nod to, who to answer, and all the time paid absolutely no attention to anything she said or did.

But there came an obstacle that perhaps Hermina had overlooked. A tall and stately dame came toward the Gamin, bent over and kissed her firmly on the mouth, and began to speak perfect and cultured English to her. The interpreter, a small, black-mustached, beady-eyed flunky, put both hands to his head and staggered backward in complete frustration.

"My dear," said the dame, "isn't it marvelous now-a-days that we do not have to worry about the beast people overhead? I think it was just too wonderful for them to bomb each other out of existence!"

The Gamin looked helplessly at the interpreter, and realized she was in for it. Putting on her best imitation of Hermina's sultry, scornful face, the Gamin replied: "Oh, it's been ages since I've seen you, my dear. Yes it *is* wonderful now-a-days not to have to worry about the poor dears upstairs."

The Grand Dame neighed like an aged horse. "You're so humorous, Hermina. I think it's excruciating to call them 'poor dears,' I do! You know, since I married the Regent of Mongolia, I have had no end of work that I would not have had here. You know, of course, the bombing of China was not nearly so severe as over here. Many scientists lived through the war, and have gathered themselves together, of all places, right over the Regent's underworld palace! It is too, too amusing, how they try to rebuild their shattered scientific records, to get the old manufacture of planes and tanks and radios and radar and automobiles going again. Of course we can't let them. I do think it would be much easier just to put them to sleep forever. They are such a bother!"

"Why doesn't the Regent tend to them?"

"He's such a tender hearted man. He often says: 'I would get rid of them, if it were not that we may need them for work, later on when we build our hunting parks and lodges and playgrounds. Just now, they don't matter.' "

About the two women circulated the wine and the gabble of egoistic lordlings, and above it all the wild mind of the Gamin held aloof, watching with a terrible and very strange reluctance to be a part of this ter-

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rible enemy of men as she knew them. Somewhere in her heritage something struggled within her, still alive and growing, and that thing hated this scene more terribly than she had ever hated "big people" before.

At last it was over, and the Gamin took the retreating bows of the visiting potentates with real pleasure in her smile, with relief to at last be free of this need to pretend to admire them all.

Back again in the ante-room of Hermina's chambers, she threw herself down upon the long chair, and closed her eyes. Hours later, she heard Hermina's door open and close, and looking up, saw a familiar face, a youth of her own age, grinning down at her. He was a youth she had seen often about, one who had sedulously avoided even noticing her before, but whom she could not avoid seeing, even watching for, for he was as handsome as a God, beautiful as only the sculptures in the wall niches were beautiful. Soft-footed, lithe, his glittering smile was always to be noted somewhere in the wake of Hermina's movements.

"So you have taken her place this night. I too am grateful to you, little wildling."

"Why should you be grateful, who had not to be there?" The Gamin still spoke with the night's stilted perfect English, unnatural to her, but not easily put off, once acquired.

"You have given me a night of love, you fool."

She snorted. "Hmmph. Is that what is important to you?"

"Is it not important to you, wildling?" The handsome youth reached out and touched the Gamin's soft, bare shoulder, gleaming and lovely above the glittering gown. She leaped to her feet, her relaxed face suddenly taut with fierce anger, and her hand reached toward that one-time always present knife. Reached twice, then fell to her side with a little gesture of resignation.

The youth, who had often indulged the curiosity of his friends with tales of the ways of the "wildling," took from his jeweled belt a small ornamental dagger, and tugged it from its sheath. He handed it to her with a mocking bow, saying: "Is this what your hand was seeking?"

The Gamin, glaring at him, was suddenly seized with a strange need, a desire for the weapon so long denied her. She snatched it from his extended lax hand with one swoop. He started at her swift motion, his face fell, then paled with fear, for no slave may have a weapon in that place for obvious reasons.

"Give it me, Gamin! It could well mean exile for me, and death for you. You are not allowed a weapon, and I am not allowed to give you one. Give it me at once!"

The Gamin laughed. "Hah, after I have waited for this so long? Hardly. Just you keep quiet about it, and I won't tell. And if you do mention, I will say you gave it me. Now get out, before I call Hermina and tell her you were trying to make love to me!"

"You wouldn't! She'd have me flayed! You wouldn't do that to me.

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Do you hate me, Gamin?"

"Little lordling, young Frankel, they call you—consort-to-be of our Queen. No, I do not hate you. Hate is something I have only for those worthy of it. You are a soft, worm-like creature my foot would not step on without disgust."

The Gamin had learned a great deal, and her voice truly sounded very like Hermina's, even to the sultry mockery in its low, evil tones. She moved swift and on her toes, stood beside him, her anger and her energy making his greater size of no account, and the knife point pressed hard, pierced the silken surcoat he wore, in through a half inch of skin and flesh. Step by step she followed as he backed away, and so forced him out the open door of the anteroom, slammed the door after him. With a face triumphant and relaxed for the first time in what must have been over a year, the Gamin slid the keen little blade into her garter above her knee, and went and stood beside the door to the sleeping chamber of the queen. She knew what Frankel and Hermina had been up to, why the queen had had her trained to double for her now. Softly she turned the big golden latch, let the door ooze open under her fingers, peered in upon the dim-lit, wide, silk-fringed bed where the young queen lay, sprawled across the silken top-cover, nude as a baby.

Now within the Gamin all the anger at her slavery, at her humiliation, her trampled independence for which she had fought and shed blood against the "big people" and had lost to this sleek, mocking "queen," all the anger of a blasted race, perhaps, boiled and bubbled.

She slid her body through the narrow opening of the door, her silks rustling about her trembling legs, and stalked that figure on the bed with Frankel's little knife rigid in her hand.

Step by step she stalked her just as she had stalked wild dogs for food, and at the last second the queen stirred from some faint inner warning. The Gamin bounded upon her naked back, caught the black, waving locks of perfumed hair, wrapped them once around her wrist and heaved back, bringing the startled face, the wide about-to-scream mouth, the eyes of sudden waking fear, up in front of her own grim ones.

"You mocked the Gamin, and now —feel her revenge!" the Gamin snarled.

She ripped the little knife hard across the straining back-bent white throat, and the red path of its cut became a torrent of arterial blood. She tugged the body off the bed, to have the blood upon the floor, for even now she was figuring if she could carry it off, and how to accomplish it.

The Gamin did not wonder at the chance the queen had been alone. She knew it had been so arranged by her attendance at the banquet. Swiftly she put her own clothes on the still bleeding body. Naked herself, she dragged the body out into the anteroom, propped it upon the same long chair where she had sat on other nights, awaiting the commands of her

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"queen." She dropped the knife beside it, and without a backward glance went into her bed chamber and climbed into the bed.

Remembering, she climbed out again. The great pool of blood beside the bed did not jibe, and the complications of her crime began to be apparent to her. She went to the anteroom, tore down a wall drape, returned to the bedroom and mopped up the blood. Then she drew water, cleaned the stain well. It was hardly to be noticed upon the dark moss of the carpet. Over the stain she threw a white fur rug. She took the stained bed coverlet off, stuffed it into a clothes hamper. Then she climbed into bed, and lay there, wide-eyed and waiting, nerving herself to play the part she had been taught with so much labor by Hermina's flunkies.

The Gamin realized hopelessly that her suddenly born scheme could not possibly come off. There was Frankel to expose her. She fell asleep from weariness toward morning.

She was wakened by the agitated slaves telling her of the body of the Gamin in the anteroom.

"The wildling has been killed," they said, standing fearfully by her bed, and showing her the knife.

The Gamin sat up, looked at the knife, said: "That is Frankel's knife. Call my officers!"

When they came, she told them to arrest Frankel and hold him in solitude until she decided what to do with him. "There was no doubt it was his knife. And right in my chambers, too. He has gone mad!"

To her vast relief they did not press her or disturb her further, but went away and left her. She fell asleep again. The Gamin did not know her nerves were made of steel, but she slept like a baby until they woke her for the noon meal. It was a vast relief not to have Hermina about to worry her, the Gamin found.

Doc Molly, standing in the ruined time-chamber with the hopes of all men's future lying blasted around her, swore a great oath to spend her last days avenging this vandalism.

She had no comprehension of the character or strength of the vandals, or the reason for their deed, for she did not trust or believe the electronic brain's analysis of the crime. She reasoned that time and concussion had deranged the delicate intricacies of what must have been an experimental mechanism at best. She had never heard of the other world people and reasoned that they could not exist. Like others, she could not bring herself to admit the possibility of their real existence and hatred of all things on Earth.

The multitude of footprints told her that some scores of people had been there. She convinced Annette that the Brain was wrong, started her off back to her school to recruit help for the tracking down of the vandals and the recovery of the contents of the time-vault.

Then Molly and Ron, leaving Charlie to watch over the brain and direct the men Annette intended to bring, started out to follow the trail

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left by the vandals. Molly feared they might take steps to hide their tracks if any time were lost. Fury lent strength to her old limbs, fury at the ignorant, ruthless barbarism that had destroyed the effort of an age, the hope of her race.

An odd pair they made, the old doctor, her worn limbs driven by a silent, grim-faced anger, and Ron who did not even attempt to understand what they were about, but knew he must try to protect this woman with his life, because her life was far more valuable than his own.

Doc Molly's strength gave out when they reached the place where the modern concrete had been blasted away from the opening into the great polished boring leading down. Her eyes took in the weird, unbelievable details of the titanic tunnel ahead, and her weary mind could not accept the implications, so tremendous, inherent in the mere existence of this work which was beyond the power of man as she knew him.

They built a little fire to warm their food, and then lay down to rest.

In their sleep the soldiers of the invader race seized them and bound them. They woke to face the existence of organized force where they had not known any existed. For Molly, all the underpinnings of her thought were knocked awry, she could not believe but that she had at last gone mad as had so many others. This race she *knew* had never existed on Earth, these pale inhuman people in smart uniforms and gold braid, with their queerly incomprehensible weapons, and their evident scorn of herself and Ron as things hardly worth the bother of keeping them alive. Molly sank into a mumbling state of shock, from which she did not recover until . . .

She looked up to see a familiar face above her, a languid, luxurious, mocking face, to be sure, but still—the Gamin!

"Gamin, child, we thought you must be dead," cried Molly, standing there before the throne of Hermina, Queen of the Eastern Provinces, Lordly Empress of Havaton, the City of Grandeur. And Hermina went pale for an instant at mention of that name and then turned away.

"Take them to the slave quarters. See the old woman is not hurt. Feed them well and give them work when they are able."

The two were led away, and the Gamin sank back, her legs quivering with relief. The thing was yet on edge. Some, she knew, must suspect; she could not know everything that she had to know to carry this on. A half-dozen of these she had sent away, others arrested and sentenced, still others she kept at bay with a chilly eye, and they understood well enough how long was their tether—just so long as their tongues were short.

Day by day she had gathered the strings of power into her hands, and many a lazy dignitary found himself suddenly replaced at his cluttered idle desk by a new, young person, ignorant of all prerogative and custom, ignorant of polite usage, ignorant indeed of all but the name of his queen, Hermina.

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Two days later the Gamin sent for old Molly and Ron.

In the privacy of Hermina's study, surrounded by volumes of other world lore that were to her only gibberish, the Gamin embraced old Molly as she had not done since she was knee high. She was learning the need of a friend. Molly looked very good to her, the only mother she had ever known. In all this strangeness, the freckled face of Ron looked to her like a cherubim off the very walls of Heaven, the face of a friend from "home."

"I thought I must be mad," sobbed Molly. "I knew you, yet I did not know you. I can not understand anything about life anymore. All this, these caverns built by a people from another planet, these machines our science has never heard about, let alone construct, this people with their bloodless, alien aspect, white as dead fish—why their very blood must flow out white as milk!"

The Gamin smiled. "In some of the oldest families, the blood is whitish, I have been told. But I have shed some of it, and that flowed red enough. But not as red as our own blood, Molly."

"But, how come you to be the mistress of all you survey, here?"

"That was easy. I was trained to double for the queen, and when I died of a cut throat, why Hermina went on living. If it was found out, I would die, of course. So my life is in your hands, now."

"I won't tell, Gamin."

"Then call me 'Your Majesty, Hermina.'"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Ron, grinning from ear to ear.

"Annette is following us with a force of men and guns, what will become of them?"

"That's good! They will be captured, and after a time I will have them installed as my personal servants, little by little, until only Earth men and women are around me. Then I can trust myself not to be betrayed suddenly. Do you know what these people think of us, Molly?"

"Not much, I gather."

"As beasts, as things to be killed as one steps on a bug—things to feed on."

One morning when the Gamin entered her throne room for the "audience," there was a tall, bronzed gentleman waiting, his tanned skin such a contrast to the white courtiers of her own retinue as to make him a freak. After due formality he handed her a great sealed parchment. The translator read it to her, word for word, and paled as he absorbed its content.

We of the Western Federation do declare total war. Since you, Queen Hermina, have consistently ridden the fence on the issue of alliance between ourselves or between yourself against those who are our mutual enemies, we give this one last chance to become our loyal supporter. If this our emissary does not return within two days from this day, our armies will enter your stronghold in force

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sufficient to wipe you out. I would suggest you join us.

Signed:
Harald
Elected Lord of the Western Alliance

The Gamin looked at the now dead-white face of the interpreter, and then at the tanned face of the tall officer, straight, big and military.

"How did you get tanned?" murmured the Gamin, irrelevantly.

"We believe in a certain amount of sunlight as necessary to health, your highness."

"Can you take me to this ruler of yours in two days?"

The score of courtiers pressing closer to the scene before the throne gasped in unison. This man represented a traditional enemy, and Hermina was talking of going to him. She would never return alive.

"Of course. I have a flyer waiting. It is exactly a two-day journey to our center."

"Where is that center?"

"If you do not know, I am not at liberty to enlighten you."

"Can he lick this bunch he figures on fighting?"

"Of course, he is not a fool, our Harald!"

The Gamin, who detested the everlasting necessity for acting like Hermina for the eyes of the Lords, acting as if she despised Earth people and "Westerns" and all things that she naturally admired, pondered the letter. Alliance with these people who were not well acquainted with her would give her freedom from many things she objected to about her. A war would give her a chance to send the men she hated off to get killed, too.

It opened to the Gamin a real chance to set her position in order here as Queen, and to wipe out the distant neighbors. An alliance with a fighting neighbor who was not well acquainted with the real Hermina was exactly what she wanted, she decided in the space of three breaths.

"I will have a writing made certifying my willingness to enter into this proposed alliance. I have had enough of things as they are. You will take this to your masters, and after they have thought it over, I would like to meet them face to face and talk it over, how many warriors they must have to carry on their war, how much loot we get as our share—all the details. They may appoint the time and place, and I will be there."

A look of cunning swept across the face of the man, and the Gamin knew the look.

"And if that thought you have just had of setting a trap for me is carried out, you will be the first to get a knife through him," appended the Gamin. "I wish to deal fairly with your rulers, believe me!"

The Gamin glared around the startled courtroom, looking at the faces that had driven her near frantic with the need for acting before them. She dropped her mask for the moment, and in the Gamin's hardest angry voice she shouted at them, "And if any of you sniveling boot-lickers don't like it, say so and see what you get."

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The ambassador backed out of the court-room, bowing low to hide the smile at the change in their queen. This would make rich reciting to his own rulers, he knew well. Hermina calling her own court out like a fish-wife—she was not the sort he had thought. This would require thought, her nature was so different from the subtle, devilishly treacherous puss they had been led to believe.

"You get back here in four days, you . . ." the Gamin shouted after the bowing, backing emissary. He replied: "With pleasure, your Highness, I shall enjoy it, I assure you."

The faint mockery in his voice did not bother her, she was used to it. Everybody among the invaders habitually talked as if they had just got through inspecting the skeleton in the closet. Not that they hadn't . . .

The Gamin retired, glowering, unable to put on the character of Hermina, and heartily tired of trying. The courtroom became a buzz of excited talk. Here and there a brilliantly costumed sycophant slipped off very leisurely to make a report to the Easterns, and the Gamin's own newly appointed secret service sent an operative after each one to take them in the act. The Gamin had ideas about some of those gentlemen. So mealy-mouthed, so mentally subservient, she knew the signs from her own experience so recently, hiding every thought with an impulse to obeisance. Several of them were vastly surprised to find themselves facing an axe that evening. But the surprise did not last long. The Gamin had studied her lessons. She knew how a queen kept her throne.

So it was that the mid-west people from space, under Hermina, trekked westward toward a certain great focci. Two wide wings of scout cars patroled ahead, and the Gamin knew exactly every tank and every hidden armored emplacement, and had them covered tight before ever she drove her own long flyer down into the huge bowl where the Westerns waited in force.

Glittering with uniforms, straight with pride, their faces full of unbelief, they watched her settle to the stone before the long line of heavy rifles behind which they waited.

Harald was young, she was surprised to learn. Young and tanned and covered with cloth of gold and emeralds and a great pride and confidence. He advanced to give her his hand as she descended from the round windowless space craft. To the Gamin it was just a thing she had got when she took Hermina's place, a possession. To a scientist, it would have been an unbelievable miracle.

The Gamin gave young Harald her best Herminian smile, though her own forthright belligerent character belied the sultry, mocking, half-closed eyes, giving a strangely attractive effect of inconsistence, of paradox in her thinking.

The Gamin swept bold speculative eyes over the line of greybeards, estimating their worth and laughing at their weighty, serious miens so that some of them smiled in return. She was having the time of her life, enjoying power and the peril that went

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with it to the utmost, and the thin ice on which she skated sent thrills through her limbs which were delicious in their fulfillment of every dream she had ever dreamed.

In the ship, old Molly and Ron watched from the window, unbelievingly noted the Gamin's confidence and queenly bearing, her perfect handling of the situation. Where could she have learned to act so well? She did not know the endless hours she had practiced the business of queening it, practiced with Hermina's whip flicking at her legs for every mistake, and sometimes on her back for a real blunder. She did not know how seriously one can take one's studies with a bleeding back flinching from further strokes.

"Your Majesty, Hermina, we are surprised and pleased beyond words," began the young ruler, a little tremor in his voice to find the queen of the traditionally cruel and treacherous Mid-Western branch of the invaders so handsome and so dashing, so plainly interested in him, so obviously friendly.

"Surprised I should turn to the Westerns? If you only knew why I am here, you would be more surprised, but not for the same reason, I assure you!"

The little slurring of the words that still remained to the Gamin from her wild days of gutter talk was charming, and the ruler racked his brains to place the accent. He could have heard the same thing in the slums of any big city, and especially in Chicago, some years before.

A long cloth-covered council table had been placed there in the center of the great empty rock-bowl, now not empty, but filled with rank on rank of armored tanks; the disks of flying craft; hundreds of the transparent levitating spherical bubbles which were preferred for air travel.

The Gamin's own forces did not enter or mingle with the massed ranks of the Westerns, but according to orders rimmed the eastern edge of the bowl with their force. She was pleased that her own were not greatly inferior in numbers or power of equipment.

"I want to know if you plan an all out war on the Eastern powers, or if you plan only to single them out one by one and overcome them." The Gamin stood at her place at the table, not sitting down, and the others perforce stood too, out of courtesy. On the table were several great parchments. These the Gamin picked up one by one, glanced at as if she could absorb their contents at a glance, lay it down again. She could not make out a word of it! The greybeards noted the instantaneous reading of what had been composed with so many hours consultation, looked at each other bewildered. What was this creature, sheer genius?

"Won't you be seated, dear friend," asked young Harald, drawing out her chair with his own hands.

"I am not your dear friend yet, Harald of the Westerns," murmured the Gamin, looking into the strong, almost swarthy face, noting the wide chin, the mouth with none of the traces of indulgence which marred

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the faces of so many, none of the weakness about the eyes and brows that told of an age of parasitism, of having others do every necessary task, the "spoon-fed" look, she called it to herself. This face was self-reliant, independent, and as she glanced at his hands on the chair's back, she was startled to see the callouses that come only from daily use.

This man even worked—trained for his warfare! She had those callouses herself, but hers were of long standing.

"I think you are going to be, so what is the difference if I am a little previous?" laughed young Harald, and the Gamin was startled again by a phenomenon new to her, a leaping heart and hammering pulse, a blush in her cheek. Her carefully held control was vanishing with the coming of a new desire to be found attractive, rather than capable—which confused her. She covered it by turning to the older men now seated on the other side of the long board. Her own still trusted nobles made but a dozen at her right hand. These had remained in her favor by a number of clever ruses, one of which was carefully ignoring all her many slips from the rigid rituals they considered good breeding. They had missed a few of their number from time to time, and had noted that those who spoke honestly and openly without whispering asides were apt to be left still present. Some of these were men who had carefully disguised their hatred of Hermina for long, but not well enough for the Gamin to miss it. She, hating the queen herself, had felt a kinship with those others of the court who feared and hated her. Of the scores who had danced attendance upon Hermina, but a slim dozen remained.

"We are considering," said an older man, the uncle of Harald, who had been Vicar and virtual ruler before the young ruler came of age. If he had known the real age and true name of the Gamin, he would have been the first to accept her masquerade as a stroke in their favor; but thinking she was still their hereditary enemy, born to hatred of the Westerns and their ways, he was extremely doubtful of Hermina's sincerity, not in sympathy with the young Lord's acceptance of her at face value. "We are considering," he repeated, "whether t'were wiser to declare open war upon the Whole Eastern Alliance, or to dissimulate, and pretend to be incensed toward them one by one, and so strike them singly in the hopes that their loose alliance will not stand the strain of actual warfare each for the other."

"Why do you have to go to war? Is there some particular cause—or do you just hate them?" asked the Gamin, innocently revealing that she knew nothing of the politics of the invaders, which was true. But they assumed that she was being humorous, ironically pretending that the Westerns and the cruel and greedy Easterns could ever live at peace. Harald assumed that she was asking indirectly what pretense had been made the cause of war.

"It was they who brought on the attack which has devastated the

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western states more than any other area. In order to follow out our long-laid plans of surface expansion for our numerous people, we have to conquer those strongholds underlying the still arable surface lands. Our own lands are no longer capable of supporting our population, let alone the homeless hordes of Earth men who roam and starve and die over our heads, exposed now not alone to hardship, but to radioactive emanations. Our holdings are in bad condition, war is our only solution—or starvation."

"Hmmm," said the Gamin, looking wise. "That means you strike north first, in my estimation."

Even the Gamin knew that Canada was least hurt of all land in North America, knew that the migration northward into Canada had been fiercely and ruthlessly fought by the native Canadians.

"Of course." Young Harald was only following out his uncle's long laid plans. His uncle had waited only until he had come of age in order that it might not be said he had plunged the boy's following into war without his consent.

"And you want to know if you can trust me as an ally without having me betray you?"

The old Vicar squinted at her frankness. She was not at all what he had expected. Where was the everlasting twisting and dodging and bickering and concealing of the truth he had expected?

The Gamin narrowed her own eyes at the bearded man at Harald's side, and smiled as he pondered her. She knew well enough what he was thinking.

So in spite of suspicion, the plans were discussed, the agreements as to division of spoils drawn up and signed and Hermina agreed to lead her own forces in the war. It was quite possible that the Alliance would not send forces to aid Canada, and that the native rulers would face their armies one at a time. The Gamin knew the whole Alliance had depended upon Hermina as the buffer against the Westerns, and had cultivated her in consequence, promising assistance so eloquently that the Gamin herself saw that they were insincere. What Hermina would have been doing in this instance was entirely a blank. She liked these people better than any of the invaders she had met. They were not so about-and-about of talk but that she could follow their meanings at least in part.

The Gamin's forces withdrew after her own departure in complete wariness of a blow in the back, in perfect military order, heavy tanks the last to leave—and guns focused on every weapon of the Westerns till they were out of range.

On her return from the Western Conference, she found awaiting her the girl Annette, with a hundred riflemen from her school, and three old bent scientists of the school's staff. They had been captured upon their entrance into the caverns, been carefully fed and kept from harm, but they stood before her throne in fear and in unbearable wonder at this place and these alien people and this

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startling alien science from another world.

The Gamin got a great thrill out of play-acting the great lady for Annette, who had been her envy but a short few months ago for her cleanliness, her smooth washed skin, her neat hands and "shoes that fit."

Now Annette stood before her, worn from the long march, dirty from a week's imprisonment, in torn, unwashed clothes, with shoes worn through and hair uncombed. The Gamin undulated toward the great throne of glistening silvery moonstone, inlaid with golden gleamings in a rich pattern, studded with fabulous jewels; clad in Hermina's most sumptuous gown, beautiful as a queen, her black hair curled and perfumed, her hands glittering with jewels, her shoulders bare and lovely—and womanly.

Annette stared, and stared again! She *recognized* the woman, but *who* was she? Then she saw old Molly and young Ron, smiling as they took places at the foot of the throne. Not the Gamin—it could not be! It didn't make sense! But it was!

"I am glad to see you once more, Annette," said the Gamin, smiling down upon her with just the right amount of queenly condescension for the commoner. The cultured tones of her voice, the smoothly perfect bearing, the hands exactly gesturing as Hermina would have done, left Annette without a mental anchor. Her mouth dropped open, and she remained speechless. The queen turned to old Doc Molly.

"Ask them what they want, and what I can do to help them," she ordered.

"I sent for them, your Majesty. They have come to recover the contents of the time-vault."

One of the aged scientists, not understanding the byplay between young Dr. Annette and Molly and the queen, stepped forward.

"We do not know what vandals wrecked the time-vault, but we have come prepared to die to recover the contents, the heritage of our race—and if you are human you will help us recover it."

The Gamin thought on it but a moment. She had seen what it contained, she had an approximate idea of its valuelessness to Hermina and her kind, and knew that they had only stolen it to make sure the Earth people would never have a weapon to fight the other world people, even in centuries to come. She waved a negligent hand. "You are welcome to the loot, it is of no value to me anyway."

The old man muttered, "I can well believe it, after what I have seen here." But that was beyond her, and she paid no attention.

"However, I want certain of you people to remain here and work for me. Molly, you pick them out. You know my needs best."

"If you will let me talk with them in private, Your Majesty?"

"You can go into the anteroom, but I will know what you say and what you think, Molly, I am warning you," murmured the Gamin to the old woman's ears alone.

The old woman moved off to lead

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the three old scientists and Annette into an anteroom off the big throne room.

The Gamin sat with her chin in her hand, looking over the students and farm hands who made up the hundred. They shifted uneasily under her over-frank eyes, while she selected those she wished to keep for herself. The youngest, the best looking, the smartest—she wanted these people around her because she thought she could understand them best. Molly came out at last, whispered in her ear.

"They would all like to stay here for a while at least, these old teachers as well as Annette. About the younger people, I can't say."

"Do you think these adults would try to do anything against me?" queried the Queen.

"Not right away. By then, after they have become oriented, you can judge better."

The Gamin turned back to the young men. "I am about to engage in a war. If you care to fight for me, I can promise you will come out a lot richer than you are, or dead!—one or the other. Do any of you like the idea, or would you rather go back to your books and your college?"

One of their old teachers spoke up: "I think you would all learn a great deal more here than you ever will out of books. This civilization itself cancels a lot of books with its very existence!"

It was thus that the Gamin acquired a group of Earth adults for her forces. It became one of her special pleasures to amaze them with the stupendous details of the strongholds of the other world people.

But there was little time for amusement. It had not taken the Westerns long to guess what was the reason for Hermina's about-face in politics, and they delightedly threw themselves into the task of promoting the conquest of her northern neighbors. This proved to be merely a matter of moving forces steadily northward while the former residents fled before them, never having sufficient numbers or organization to face the combined power of Hermina's vast array of equipment added to the strength of the Westerns.

But as they swept east and north toward the centers around Montreal the real strength of the Northerns began to assemble, for now the far East, realizing that the sudden new growing strength of the Western Alliance must be checked at once or all their plans for Earth as a playground peopled only by slaves would be blasted, literally.

So they sent reinforcements around by the northern Route from the north Atlantic. These gathered and planned in Newfoundland, and swept south and west to meet the Alliance.

The Gamin got her first taste of real warfare; killing at ranges of many miles, thousands of men blasted out of existence with one wide sweeping Master weapon.

The ruthless sacrifice of their warriors by the Eastern Federation sickened even the Gamin, and beside her young Harald vomited, sick to death

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at the hecatombs of men whose only sin was being under the domination of those who considered them cattle.

At first shock, it seemed the vast strength of the Easterns would hold and turn back the advance, but as the tanks advanced, the Eastern Nobles, far behind the battle lines, learned that their whole force had been wiped out. Their telescreens showed only scattered fleeing remnants of their troops. They fled in terror back to their far Eastern strongholds, there to ready themselves for last ditch defense to the death.

There were many among the Gamin's following who had expected quite the reverse because of her inexperience and bcause they had always regarded the Westerns as too humanitarian to be good warriors. These now were amazed that the raw girl had been canny enough to pick the right side.

The Gamin was with Harald in a private chamber of the palace when the news came that resistance had completely vanished. She sat still for a long moment, stunned by the victory.

Harald turned to her and caught her hands in his. A grin of triumph twisted his lips.

"It's over!" he said. "It's over—and we've won!"

"I'm glad!" the Gamin said abruptly. "I've had enough of killing As long as I live, I'll work to see that things like this don't happen again."

Harald's features softened. Impulsively, he bent a knee in the traditional gesture of proposal. His grip on the Gamin's hands tightened.

"I've heard whispers that you're really not the Hermina everyone has known, but I want to tell you that they mean nothing to me, true or false. I have learned all the truth about you that I want to know. And . . . I want you to marry me—to weld our people into one strong weapon to blast forever the last remnants of the evil nobility among our race who have ruined lives for so many years. I want you to join with me in the effort to make the world safe and happy for all men, those from my planet and from yours."

The room seemed to whirl around the Gamin. Things had happened much too fast! But already she knew the answer, for her feelings toward Harald were of a type no man had ever aroused in her.

She thought of the chaos in which she had grown—chaos emphasized by the horrible conflict which had just ended. She knew this was past, knew it with the certainty of the change she felt in herself. Better, brighter days were ahead. She would work for them—and Harald would be at her side, helping her. She became aware of him again, aware that he was waiting for her answer. She nodded, smiling mistily.

With a grin of joy, he rose swiftly to take her in his arms. The movement startled the Gamin into a habit so old it had become pure reflex action. Her hand flashed to the knife in her dress, and in the next instant the glittering point was touching Harald's throat.

He gasped, bewildered and dis-

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mayed. "Why, what—"

The Gamin recovered herself with a laugh. "Just an old trick of mine. But you'd better remember it if you ever change your mind!" Then she threw the knife over her shoulder, and she did not hear the sound it made as it fell. She was experiencing her first kiss.

The results were such that the Gamin assured herself emphatically that it wasn't going to be the last.

And Molly, who happened on the scene, turned away and wept with joy. It was only too evident that the Gamin's hardness had not been due to exposure to radioactivity.

THE END

EDITORIAL

(Concluded from page 23)

Howard. We'll even let our readers know what you intend to present, so they don't miss the good stories. After all, we can't publish everything, and we do want our readers to read every good story that comes along. So, we suggest that you give us a hint, so we can give you some publicity. Our motto is, "When you've read the best OTHER WORLDS has to offer, read the best in the other magazines too."

By the way, the January issue of *Super Science Stories* has a good one in it. It's "Outpost Infinity" by Raymond F. Jones. We hope you can still get a copy!

And Theodore Sturgeon has a novel coming up in *Fantastic Adventures* which you certainly shouldn't miss. We've already read it and enjoyed it.

Re-reading the second issue of OTHER WORLDS, we found that the gas strike in Milwaukee had worked its evil on us, too. It seems that the machines that make the mats for our magazine are run by gas, and so they had to be made by another process. They turned out bad, ruined the type, and the whole magazine had to be reset, resulting in two weeks' delay, and in several typographical errors we had no opportunity to catch. But worst of all, four pages in Millen Cooke's story "Descent from Mera" were misnumbered. So, you had trouble finding your way around in that issue! But we promise it won't happen again, and as Art Director Herman Bollin of Ziff-Davis remarked: "What does Palmer know about production?" Nothing, Herm, and this ought to prove it—but we're learning.

Well, fans, this is the first issue of OTHER WORLDS which shows some slight evidence of what we're eventually going to make out of the magazine. It's slight, we admit, but we're leaving plenty of room for further development—which is still up to you readers. Your letters are all being filed under B in our files. B is for Bible. Until May . . . *Rap*

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LIVE IN AN ORBIT AND

Millions of families purchased orbits and built homes that circled Earth and the Moon — until the problem of a shortage of mass to build them threatened to put the real estate operators out of business . . .

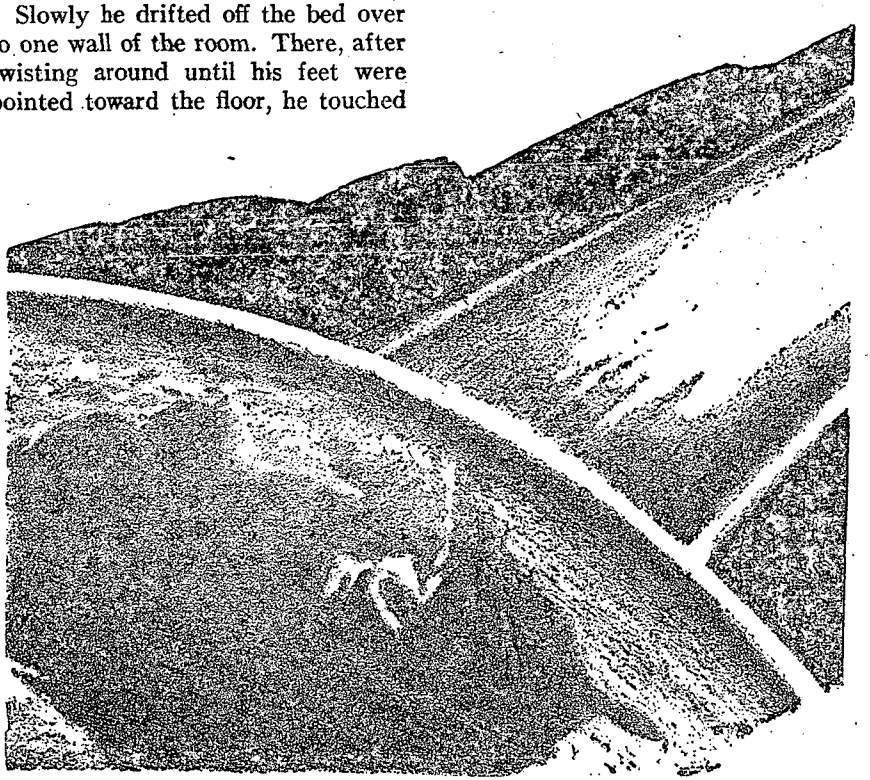
GEE-ORGE!"

"I'm awake, Martha."

Reaching into the pocket of his pajamas, George Mansard drew out a small red object and squeezed it in his hand. The squeezing closed a contact that allowed current to flow in a small but powerful coil, generating a magnetic current.

Slowly he drifted off the bed over to one wall of the room. There, after twisting around until his feet were pointed toward the floor, he touched a red dot in the wallpaper. Immediately he settled downward, the steel mesh in the soles of his slippers gripped comfortably by the mild magnetic field pattern now in the floor.

He slipped the small red object back into his pajama pocket. Rubbing his scalp with the tips of his fingers,



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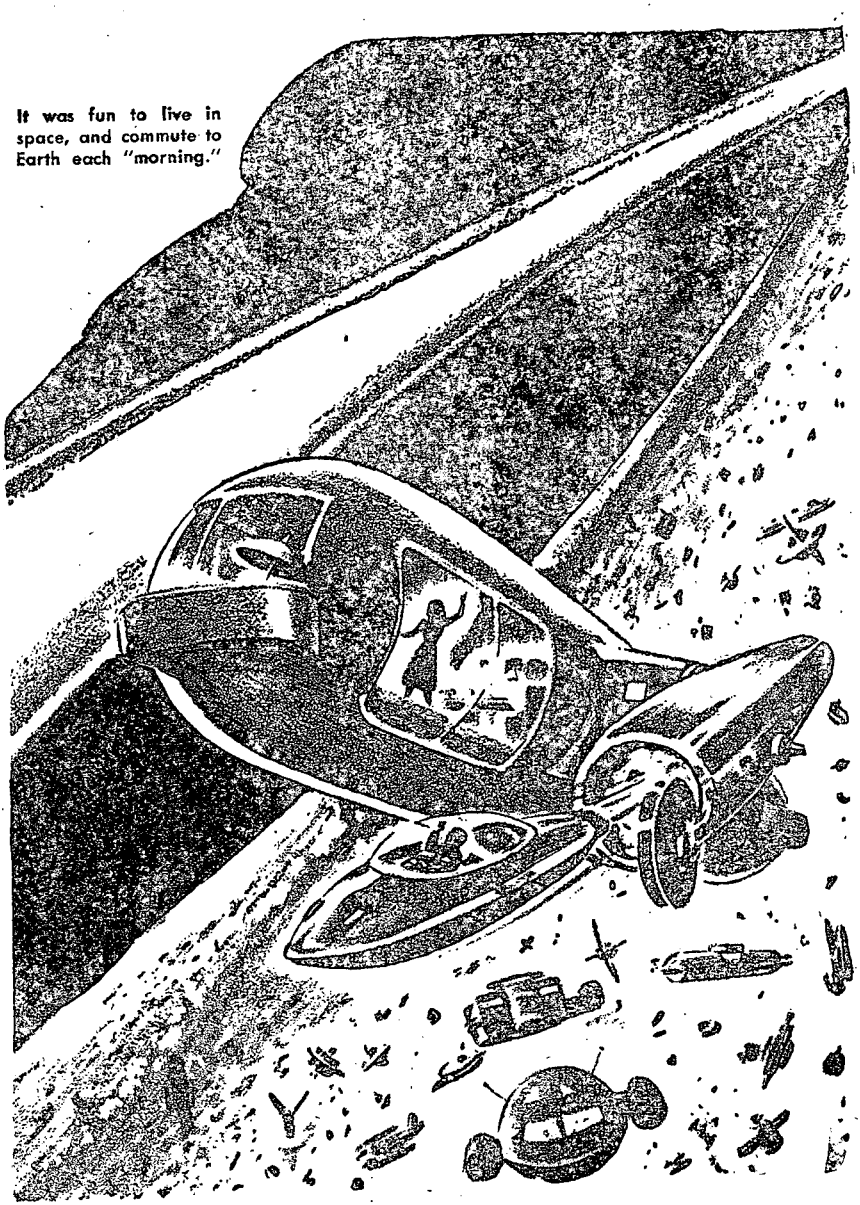
LOVE IT!

By CRAIG BROWNING



It was fun to live in space, and commute to Earth each "morning."

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he walked over to the door. Before touching the knob he let one finger come near it. A bright but harmless spark passed between his finger and the metal knob.

Now he gripped the knob and opened the door. Outside in the hall he closed it again. Flicking the toggle that shut off the floor coils and the electrostatic repulsors back in his sleeping room, he went on down the hall to his dressing room.

Stripping off his pajamas and magnetic slippers, he stepped into the shower stall. The warm air downdraft from the perforated ceiling that entered the perforated floor where it was shot up through the walls and down through the ceiling again, kept his feet on the floor.

He turned the spray on. Pressure forced the spray against his skin. The air downdraft guided the water downward to the floor and through it to the centrifugal rotor that shot the water through the filter and back into the spray pipe; the air went back up to the ceiling again via the walls.

The shower over, he left the stall and opened the door of the clothes closet. The warm downdraft dried him as he decided what to put on.

"Let's see," George muttered to himself. "Oh yes. I want to see that real estate man today and find out how our new place is coming. I'd better put on something fairly new."

Twenty minutes later he emerged from his dressing room fully dressed, a perfect example of what a dignified, well-to-do business man should look like.

Six feet down the hall was the kitchen door. He eyed it a moment, then began to take measured steps.

"One, two, three," he counted, and his body passed right through the closed door. On the other side was nothing but the airless void of interstellar space. "Four, five, six," he counted, walking steadily through it. A red, bloated segment of an octopus lashed at him, its round suckers sucking hungrily and noisily. "Seven, eight," he counted his measured steps. The octopus tentacle passed through him and writhed angrily behind him.

He paused. His feet were now on the sands of a burning desert. At his feet curled a venomous copperhead, its broad, flat head three feet above the ground, tongue darting in and out.

He reached out and wrapped his hand around the snake's head and twisted it clockwise. The snake eluded his casual, indifferent grasp and lunged at him, through him.

Where it had been was a doorknob. He pushed gently. The desert became a door that was opening under his touch. On the other side was a cheery kitchen.

" 'Morning, Martha," George said, stepping into the room. "Junior! Shut off that projector. I've had enough of your nonsense this morning. Some day I'll forget how many steps it is from my dressing room to the kitchen door. Then I'll tan you good."

He crossed the room, kissed his wife tenderly, then sat down at the table and squeezed himself a tube of hot coffee.

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Breakfast over, George Mansard left the kitchen. Crossing the enormous living room, he stepped into the elevator well. He could have walked up the sides of the shaft respectably, as his wife always did; but he preferred the more risky process of travel. There was a cross bar at each level. George gripped the bar, steadied himself, then swung and let go in one smooth movement. He sailed along through the shaft slowly, turning over and over, until he caught the bar at the next level.

"A ten and a half gainer!" he congratulated himself. "Junior couldn't do much better."

He was in the solarium. His shoes clicked against the tile veneer floor as they felt the magnetic suction of the floor magnets underneath. He breathed deeply, enjoying the perfume of the blooming flowers. About him flashed yellow wings of canaries. The air was filled with their song.

His office had one wall of glass so that he could look out over the full expanse of the solarium. Humming a tune, in high good humor, he opened the door to his office and went in.

Flicking the toggle switch beside the door, he went over to his desk and sat down.

The flicking of the toggle switch did more than just turn on the hidden, indirect lighting. It also started the air-conditioner and floro-regulator which regulated the amount of ionization in the air, keeping it at just the right degree for three dimensional image projection.

It also turned on the system of coordinated scanners and projectors. As he crossed the room to his desk, duplicates of himself materialized out of thin air and slid across the floor to merge with him, as the projectors went through their process of orientation.

It was the same principle that was embodied in Junior's projector, only Junior's was a film projector toy, while the one here was an nth degree refinement on the old video camera and projector, taking stereoptican views of actual things, and projecting them into three dimensional form by using the principle of light interference effects on certain extremely delicate ion complexes created in the floro-regulator.

By the time George Mansard had seated himself behind his desk, the whole complex system had tuned itself and was ready to be cut into the communications network, so that at the touch of the dial conveniently located on his desk he could contact any one of six hundred and seventy million other such solidophone units.

He reached toward the dial and paused, frowning.

"Darn," he muttered. "Forgot the number."

He dialed two one one. Immediately a thick telephone book materialized on his desk. For an instant it was blurred, seeming to be two or three books materialized in the same space. Then the heterodyning of his own scanner picking up the images of the projected image, brought them all together into one apparently solid book.

As George's fingers turned the pages, an electronic device in the information office a hundred thousand

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miles away turned the pages of the actual book, so that for all practical purposes it was as if there were a real telephone book on his desk.

"Ah, here we are," George muttered, his finger coming to rest on a number. "Strato-homes, Inc. 3-546-611-32249."

He dialed the number. Across the room from him a very beautiful young lady materialized and smiled at him.

"The line is busy," she said. "You will be called when your turn comes. Please be patient."

George sat back, sighing as the young lady vanished. She was merely a film projection, but none the less appealing. A distinct improvement over the old busy signal.

He drummed his fingers on the desk while he waited.

Suddenly a man materialized in the center of the room. It was the salesman at Strato-homes, Inc. George rose hastily and circled the desk to meet him.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Mansard," the projected image said.

"Good morning, Mr. Hairdon," George answered.

Man and projected image shook hands, their hands passing into each other and through each other because of lack of coordination, the salesman's projected form being no more solid than a light beam or the air itself.

"We have some more figures on your new home, Mr. Mansard," Mr. Hairdon said.

He turned to a filing cabinet that had materialized along with him, and searched until he found a folio. He thumbed through its contents rapidly.

"Ah, here we have it," he said. His eyes skimmed down the sheet of paper. A disappointed look appeared on his face. "That's too bad, Mr. Mansard," he said apologetically. "I hadn't thought this would affect you. There's a shortage of materials for the shells. The amount we have left won't quite reach to you. In fact, you'll be first on the list when we run out completely."

"But I thought the shell was just made out of rock!" George exclaimed.

"That's right," Mr. Hairdon said. "But since 2056 it's been unlawful to take rock from the Earth, the Moon, Mars, or Venus."

"I always thought that's where you got the stuff," George exclaimed irritably. "Where do you get it?"

"We've been getting it from the asteroid belt for a good many years," Mr. Hairdon said. "Also we have a large fleet of space sweepers that do a very good job of picking up the little rocks. But the asteroid belt is exhausted now, and space doesn't bring in enough rock to make it pay."

"You mean you're going to have to go out of business?" George asked incredulously.

"No, nothing like that," Mr. Hairdon said hastily. "All it takes is a little time to get through red tape. We already have our lobbyists in Washington pushing through so we can use Saturn's rings. There're probably over a billion tons of rock there."

"How long do you think it will be before I can hope for my new place?"

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George asked.

"Probably within ten months," Mr. Hairdon replied. "We expect to have permission to use Saturn's rings by a week from tomorrow. It will take two months to bring the first load of rock, six months to blow the bubble and allow it to cool, and six weeks to install the prefab interiors and settle your new home in that choice orbit you picked out for it. By the way, how did you ever manage to buy that orbit? There are only two hundred and thirteen of the figure eight orbits in the Earth-Moon system. We've tried to buy those seventy-six vacant ones, but without any success."

"Well," George said, clearing his throat importantly. "As a matter of fact, my wife's uncle left us five of them in his will. He bought them in his younger days—purely as a real estate venture. He originally owned ten of them, but sold five for a fabulous figure."

Mr. Hairdon's nostrils quivered in sudden interest.

"Do you mean to say," he said slowly, "That you own five of the figure eight orbits?" He didn't wait for an answer, but continued. "Would you be interested in selling the other four?"

"How much would you pay?" George asked. "They're assessed at seventy-five thousand each, you know."

Mr. Hairdon suddenly became reserved.

"I'll have to consult with the board," he said. "A lot could happen. If we can't push through legislation to use Saturn's rings, orbit values will drop way down. On the other hand they could shoot skyhigh."

"Hmmm," George said thoughtfully, a shrewd light growing in his eye. "What it amounts to is, either I stand not to get my new home *and* my real estate drops to bedrock, or I get my home and my real estate keeps on increasing in value."

"Something like that," Mr. Hairdon agreed. "You stand to lose everything or make everything."

"Maybe there's a compromise where I stand to gain less and lose less, whichever way it goes," George said significantly. "But tell me, is there a real chance that the government won't allow you to take rock from Saturn's belts?"

"Frankly, we're worried," Mr. Hairdon said. "The Astrogeological Society has a very strong lobby trying to make them into a government preserve to protect them. They're one of the finest fields of study of pre-Terra human civilization ever discovered. They were once the strato-residential section of Saturn before the surface Saturnians wiped themselves out with their last atom bomb war, you know."

"Well," George said. "I want my new home. This old thing is getting too depressing. Anyway, the plumbing is getting too old. Maybe we could make a deal. Move my name up on the list so that—"

"Don't *say* such a thing, Mr. Mansard," Mr. Hairdon said hastily. "It wouldn't be fair to those ahead of you. Some of them are planetbound and have been waiting years for a

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satellite home. Some of them are newlyweds who were born and raised out here in gravityless ease. Think of the hardship on them!"

"Okay, okay," George said. "But think it over."

After Mr. Hairdon had cut off, his solid image in the room vanishing as abruptly as the turning off of a light, George dialed one of the programs. A program coming over the communications network worked only one way. That is, the objects at the other end became solid images in his office, but he and his office didn't become solid images in the program studio. Also, on the program numbers, after the connection was made his own phone call unit cut open so no one calling him would get the busy signal.

It was the Spuick program, and he had tuned in during the commercial. He watched the demonstration of the beautiful spacecar enviously. His own Spuick was ten years old. The new model had shorter wings—four inches narrower than on his old crate—a top airspeed of thirteen hundred compared to the eleven hundred of his model, and the new air-renewer that could accommodate two more passengers in the same size car.

Also, it used the new number sixty fuel wire and the eighty million volt proton generator, giving four percent more fission. The 2150 Spuick whose image rested on the floor was twenty feet long, five feet high, and eight feet wide from wing tip to wing tip, with a full five and a half feet of seat width. From needle nose to stern jets it was an artist's dream come true.

The bathing suit attired blonde getting into it and out of it and showing its various features wasn't hard to look at either.

The Spuick and the blonde vanished. Where it had been, a living room materialized with a pretty young girl lying on a davenport in revealing pose, crying as if her heart would break.

"Another soap opera," George groaned. But he left it on, his thoughts returning to the problems confronting him before he could get his new home built.

He sighed. It didn't look much like he'd get that new home with its figure eight orbit that took it on a forty day journey around the Earth and the Moon on the outer residential zone where building permits allowed forty-five thousand tons mass. Here in the inner zones twenty-seven thousand tons of mass was all you could have. The rock shell itself took up almost twenty-three thousand of those tons, leaving an inner diameter of only a hundred and fifty feet for living space with its rooms and equipment and two thousand ton gyro-stabilizer.

He had watched the forming of a rock bubble once. It had been quite a thing: the thousands of tons of molten, completely de-gassified rock, a cosmic drop of fiery liquid at the end of a long tube. Air shot through the tube to blow up the molten mass. The whole thing shook loose from the air tube to become a glowing bubble drifting along in an orbit far out away from the Earth-Moon rings

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until it cooled and solidified. Then holes were cut into it, the interior prefabs moved in and put together. And finally it was moved by space tugs into its assigned orbit with a minimum of disturbance of its neighbors.

It was all very spectacular and wonderful, and beautifully simple, including the linear accelerator that shot electrons away at almost light speed whenever the static charge dropped below a safe potential. It was the like electric charges on all the homes of the rings that kept them from banging into one another. When they got too close together they repelled one another without touching.

George drifted from these thoughts about home construction to the immediate problem, while the soap opera continued unnoticed.

Maybe he had been indiscreet, telling Mr. Hairdon about owning the five figure eight orbits. He regretted it now. The real estate man might figure out some way to force him to sell.

"Well," George muttered aloud. "I guess I could stand this dump another few years if necessary, rather than being rooked out of anything. Funny they're running out of rock though. I seem to have read somewhere that fifteen million tons of it fall into the sun every second or hour or something.

"Wonder if it isn't a scheme of those construction people? Still, Mr. Hairdon seemed surprised to learn I owned those figure eight orbits. Uncle John told Martha if we hung onto those orbits they'd be worth a million apiece before we die, when the number of vacant orbits gets way down to only a few hundred . . ."

Junior took the wire spool out of the snooper and hid it in a secret drawer of his Space Rangers desk. There was a light of excitement in his eyes as he pulled open another secret drawer containing his "headquarters" phone, an old style two way radiophone that broadcast and received voice only.

"S R oh three five calling S R two four seven," he droned.

"S R two four seven calling S R oh three five. Over," a voice answered immediately.

"Hi, Johnny," Junior said. "Listen to this. I think I'm on the track of a big interplanetary real estate swindler."

"No kiddin'!" Johnny's voice sounded. "Shoot me the details."

"Well, it's like this," Junior said. "This real estate agent Pop's got building us a new home on one of his figure eight orbits is pulling a fast one, I think. He told Pop there's a shortage of rock, and he might not get the home. It sounds like the old C-3 game."

"You mean," Johnny's voice said, "he painted your pop a picture of him being several down on the list, and first on the list when they run out of materials?"

"That's right, Johnny," Junior said. "Only he added a new twist. He said they might get a permit to get rock from Saturn's rings, but there was opposition to that, and it might not come through."

"Of course," Johnny's voice

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sounded sarcastically, "they're fishing for a bonus of some kind to push his name up a notch over someone else."

"Pop tried to make a deal with them and they—their man—put on the holy act," Junior said. "I have a snooper camera and mike hidden in Pop's office, and am taking everything down on a permanent wire spool for evidence. Do you know anybody whose dad is on the Astro-geological Society board of directors?"

"Maybe," Johnny answered. "Why?"

"Find out if they're really trying to get Saturn's rings made into a government preserve," Junior said.

"I can tell you that right now," Johnny said quickly. "They are. And it's almost certain they will."

"Golly," Junior said. "Maybe the real estate man's on the level then. But I hate to think so. It looks so much like a con game. That would be something if we could get the goods on a real live crook!"

George Mansard cut out the soap opera and dialed another number. The man who materialized across the room behind an ornate desk was portly and perfectly groomed.

"Hello, Senator Filgree," George said with hasty politeness. "I'm George Mansard, in your district."

"Glad to know you, George," the Senator said heartily. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know if they're going to make Saturn's rings into a preserve?" George asked.

"I believe they are, George," the Senator said. "Yes, I feel quite sure they are."

"Is there any way to stop it?" George asked. "It'll put me in quite a spot if they do. The real estate people tell me if it goes through there won't be enough rock to make my new home on my figure eight property."

"I'd like to help you, George," the Senator said sympathetically. "Afraid I can't, though. Even if I voted against it, it would be carried."

"Thanks," George said weakly. He started to cut the connection.

"Just a moment, George," Senator Filgree said. "Did you say your figure eight property?"

"Yes," George said.

"How much do you own?" the Senator asked.

"Five vacant orbits," George answered.

And under the Senator's questioning he told him the whole thing . . .

"Pop," Junior interrupted his father's breakfast day dreams two mornings later.

"Huh?" George Mansard said. "Oh. What is it, Junior?"

"Uh," Junior hesitated. "I was talking with a friend of mine. He was telling me about a big crooked real estate syndicate that's been operating lately."

"Yes, Junior?" George said, squeezing a sip of coffee into his mouth.

"Yeh," Junior said, encouraged. "The way they operate, they make the sucker think there's a shortage of

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materials for new homes. They tell him he's up close to the top on the list, but they'll run out before they get to him. Naturally he tries to offer them a bribe to put his name ahead of someone else's. They refuse the bribe, but they make some kind of a strictly legal deal where they get the bribe anyway. Something like taking vacant property instead of cash for the whole transaction."

"Sounds interesting," George said absently. He left the table and went to his office.

Junior went to his room and switched on the snooper for recording and sound, so he could hear what went on. He was puzzled. He called up Johnny and told him about it.

"It wasn't like Pop," he complained. "He's usually sharp. I expected him to get it right away that I had been spying on him with my snooper. When he accused me of it, I intended to tell him all about how we investigated this whole thing for him. But all he said was that it sounded interesting!"

"Maybe you picked the wrong time," Johnny's voice sounded. "My dad's always half asleep at breakfast time too."

"Pop usually isn't that sleepy," Junior said. "Hang on a minute. I think Pop's calling the real estate man now. I'll lay the phone where you can get it all."

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Mansard," the three dimensional image of Mr. Hairdon said, smiling disarmingly.

"Good morning, Mr. Hairdon," George said, a worried look on his face. "What's the latest?"

"Well, ah," Mr. Hairdon said cagily, "we, the board and I, have been discussing your, ah, problem. Very seriously, too, I assure you. Things look quite black. I hate to say it, but things really do."

"How much would you take to move my name up?" George asked bluntly.

"Don't *say* such a thing," Mr. Hairdon said, looking around hastily. "It just can't be done. However—" He paused until George's face assumed the proper intensity of hope-against-hope. "Quite often," he went on. "The board permits a little speculation. As Mr. Fairchild, the board president said, 'We have the idle space sweepers. We could sweep the necessary rock out of space and take the loss *if* we accepted real estate instead of money in payment, because the value of real estate is alterable. We could just keep the real estate on the books for a few years, then mark our loss to real estate loss rather than operating losses.' That's the way he put it."

"You mean that rather than pay cash for my new home I trade some of my property?" George asked.

"Precisely," Mr. Hairdon said. "On pure speculation. We're still gambling that we will get the license to take rock from Saturn's rings. If that falls through we will, frankly, suffer a terrible loss. It may be centuries before the Solar System runs through a field of rock again, so that we can cheaply gather the material for the rock bubbles."

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Mr. Hairdon smiled at George innocently. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he knew George had checked and found that the permit would not go through, and that Saturn's rings were to be made into a national preserve. Nor that he had deliberately built things up so that George would be led to believe he was pulling a fast one in unloading his vacant property.

"Well," George said. "I guess I could trade one of my figure eight orbits for my new home. Okay, it's a deal."

"Just a minute, Mr. Mansard, "Mr. Hairdon said hastily. "The deal I was authorized to make was—he took a deep breath. "That we will make your home for four of those five vacant orbits."

"Four of them!" George said, half rising from his chair.

"It's a gamble," Mr. Hairdon went on quickly. "It will cost at least an extra hundred thousand in actual dollars to build your home, gathering the rock from space. And if we don't get the permit to gather rock from Saturn's rings, your property will be worthless. If you turn us down, your property won't be worth a dime anyway in a couple of weeks."

"I could sell those four on the open market right now and get the extra money to pay you cash," George said hotly.

"It wouldn't work," Mr. Hairdon said, shaking his head for emphasis. "You forget the price ceilings. We could accept the real estate and enter it in our books as being worth just under price ceilings, then mark the extra we get for it later as profit on a real estate venture. But we couldn't accept the extra money."

"I guess you're right," George said ruefully. He pulled at his lip for a minute in deep thought. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you two of those orbits for building my home."

"Sorry," Mr. Hairdon said inflexibly. He smiled apologetically. "Please understand that if it was only me I would be able to dicker with you. I can only carry out orders. My orders are—all four orbits or no deal."

"What kind of guarantees will I have?" George asked. "How soon can I get my new home if I agree?"

"I am authorized to tell you that," Mr. Hairdon said. "Rock is rock. If you agree to our terms, we will start your new home at once, using rock on hand. We will use the rock we comb from space to replace what we took from our stock pile, so that we aren't cheating those ahead of you. We will give you an ironclad agreement to have your new home completed and in its orbit within six months. Further, you can choose which of your five vacant orbits you wish it to be in, and we will take the other four. You have first choice that way." He smiled.

"If I don't," George said dispiritedly. "I'll be stuck with five worthless orbits and have to stay in this flea trap I've got now."

"That's right," Mr. Hairdon said sympathetically.

"I think I'll do it," George said. "Provided you give me that guarantee in writing so that whatever happens you have to go ahead. I want the guarantee that my new home will be

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ready for me six months from today, backed by the current market value of the property you are getting—those four orbits. And I want it today."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Hairdon said happily. "I realize how anxious you are to get your new home. I'll go right ahead with it now. The papers are just about ready. Hang on."

"Oh my gosh!" Junior exclaimed into his phone. "Pop fell for it. Think of something, Johnny."

"Think of something yourself," Johnny's voice sounded. "He's your pop, not mine. He thinks he's pulling a fast one. He probably called up his senator and found out Saturn's Rings aren't going to be gutted for rock. He doesn't know that rock in space is still plentiful, and there's no real shortage of building material. Mr. Hairdon could build your new home and a new home on each of those other four vacant orbits tomorrow—and probably will, as soon as he gets your pop's signature on the transfer."

"It's too late," Junior groaned as he watched George and the real estate man sign papers; and the signatures, he knew, were being recorded on wire spools for permanent and quite legal proof of the transaction.

He watched, describing what went on to Johnny, as his father signed and Mr. Hairdon signed. He saw his father take the wire spool out of the scanner and place it in his safe.

He saw George and Mr. Hairdon shake hands. He could wait for no more. He ran and glided with all the skill of a lifetime on a gravityless satellite home until he reached his father's office, and burst in.

"Pop!" he said breathlessly. "You shouldn't have done it! Mr. Hairdon's a crook!"

"So, Junior," George purred menacingly. "You've been spying on me, have you?"

"Sure, Pop," Junior said. "I'm willing to take my medicine for that. But I tried to warn you. Now you've done it!"

"I don't think so, Son," George said. He glanced at his watch. "Wait around a bit. I think you'll find you're still able to learn a few things from your father."

"You mean you knew the whole thing was crooked all along?" Junior asked unbelievingly.

"Of course," George said. "Almost any minute now Mr. Hairdon will be calling me back and wanting to call off the whole thing. I have him sewed up."

"I don't get it, Pop," Junior said. "You signed over those four orbits to him in exchange for his building our new home, which is only worth one of them. They won't drop in value because there's plenty of available rock to build homes for them."

The buzz signal sounded to indicate someone was calling. George pressed the connection stud. Mr. Hairdon materialized across the room.

"I just found out something that resolves your whole problem, Mr. Mansard," he said. "We've discovered a new source of rock, so we can tear up that contract we just signed and go ahead with building your home

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on a strictly cash basis. I couldn't wait to tell you the good news."

"What good news?" George asked insolently. "We have an agreement. Go ahead and fulfill it."

Junior looked from his father to Mr. Hairdon, trying to figure out what it was all about. His father held a smug smile on his face. Mr. Hairdon's face was slowly sagging.

"All right," Mr. Hairdon said leadenly. "What will you settle for."

"Settle?" George mocked. "There's nothing to settle. You build my home on one of the five vacant figure eight orbits and take the other four in exchange, or you pay me the current market value of those four—as it was an hour ago, that is—as a penalty."

"I mean what would you settle for right now?" Mr. Hairdon asked.

"Not a cent less," George said, emphasizing each word. "I can wait the six months for my money."

He pressed the button that broke the connection.

"I don't get it, Pop," Junior said.

"Well, this is just between you and me," George said. "I called up a—certain person high in government affairs and told him the whole thing. He agreed with me it was a crooked deal. But he knew something that wouldn't be made known until today. You see, orbits don't actually exist unless something travels in them. They're a sort of mathematical fiction. When the first orbit homes were built, government survey mathematicians mapped out all the possible orbits for homes circling Earth and the Moon. These were listed, and sold by the government to private individuals. Your mother's uncle bought some of them—got the deeds for them.

"That was all very nice. All these years we've owned those orbits. But for about fifteen years now those orbits haven't existed any more."

"Haven't existed?" Junior echoed.

"That's right," George said. "About two months ago they discovered that due to the added mass of all the homes in the rings around the Earth, the Moon has moved its orbit in about a mile closer to the Earth. That cuts my five figure-eight orbits out of existence. The government announced that publicly today, and will re-imburse the present owners the original amount paid for those orbits. That's about two hundred dollars an orbit."

"So Mr. Hairdon can't build our new home because there isn't an orbit to put it in!" Junior said. "And he has to pay you three hundred seventy-five thousand dollars."

"That's right," George said smugly.

"Then we have to stay here?" Junior asked.

George Mansard dialed a program number. Immediately the room was transformed into a place where semi-dressed, beautiful girls were sailing about in a three-dimensional dance to the strains of soft, rhythmic music in some gravityless broadcasting studio in the Earth-Moon rings.

He watched them in their seductive, suggestive dance, and sighed deeply.

"Yes, Junior," he said, "I guess we'll have to live in this run down, rickety old satellite—and like it."

"Poor Mr. Hairdon," Junior said.

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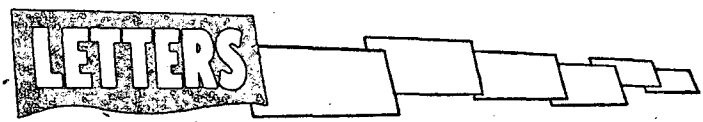
"He was going to take you, but you took him instead. Are you a crook too, Pop?"

"No, Junior," George said. "I'm just a smart business man. Now run along and leave me alone." He watched Junior go to the door to the garden, and open it. He glanced at the gliding girls. "And shut off that snooper and leave it off," he called after him. "If you don't, I'll tan your hide for you!"

THE END



W. A. Smith

Yes, I missed the first issue—but I got the second. Enclosed is a check for $3.35—please enter my subscription.

I get a kick out of your LETTERS—most of them are impudent, and display the colossal—abyssmal—or what would a Hollywoodite say? — ignorance combined with conceit of the writers. I'm content to let you use your own judgment in your business—and shall continue to back your judgment as to what is a good story. Seldom, indeed, do you have one I can't take. Best wishes in your new venture.

3052 Beechwood Blvd.
Pittsburgh 17, Pa.

Your first issue has been sent you, and thanks for the subscription. Actually, most of the letters we get try to be helpful, and we do try to give them what they want. Obviously, we are already giving you what you want—and we'll do even better as time goes by.—Ed.

T. Sgt. E. H. Redam

Just completed the January 1950 OTHER WORLDS. This mag promises to be so good that the decision immediately to sit down and give you my opinion came just about ten minutes ago, or five minutes after reading the last words in the last column, "Did you miss your copy too?"

I have been in the U. S. Air Force for more than six years and am presently stationed near the Pentagon Building in Washington. Whenever a discussion commences of the fictional sciences, others in the discussion usually request excerpts from me from the many stories in my mind.

Taking the stories in their order of printing, I rate as follows. *Sons Of The Serpent* (2) Excellent. *This Time . . .* (1) Excellent. *The Fatal Word* (5) Usual. *To Give Them Welcome* (3) Excellent—new slant. *Descent From Mera* 4 (?).

To be very frank I think that Melva Rogers' *To Give Them Welcome* is one of the best in SF I have ever read. It presents a new slant on visitors from outer space. I recommend, and strongly, that more of this author's works be included in future OTHER WORLDS. I rated this story number 3 only because I did enjoy *This Time . . .* and *Sons Of The Serpent* slightly better. There was just a little too much of the present-day *love* mush in this story. Rog Phillips has always been an interesting writer and even though he did deviate from his usual style in *This Time . . .*, I still rated this number one over all five stories. *Sons Of The Serpent* immediately brought back to mind all the time travel stories I have read, with one major difference. The idea of moving an entire city through time is an appalling one, but an excellent idea for this SF story. Wes Amherst is a good author, and you must have more of his stories.

2004 12th Road, So.,
Arlington, Virginia.

This issue we have ten stories for you to rate—and we imagine it's going to be a tougher job to pick out the best. We will have more from Melva Rogers and Wes Amherst. How about the partial list for next issue (May)? A. E. Van Vogt; Raymond F. Jones; Millen Cooke; E. E. Evans; Richard S. Shaver; Jerome Bixby; Bill Wallrich, and so on. We're going to tread on Astounding's toes soon, not only their heels. This is a threat!—Ed.

(Continued on page 138)

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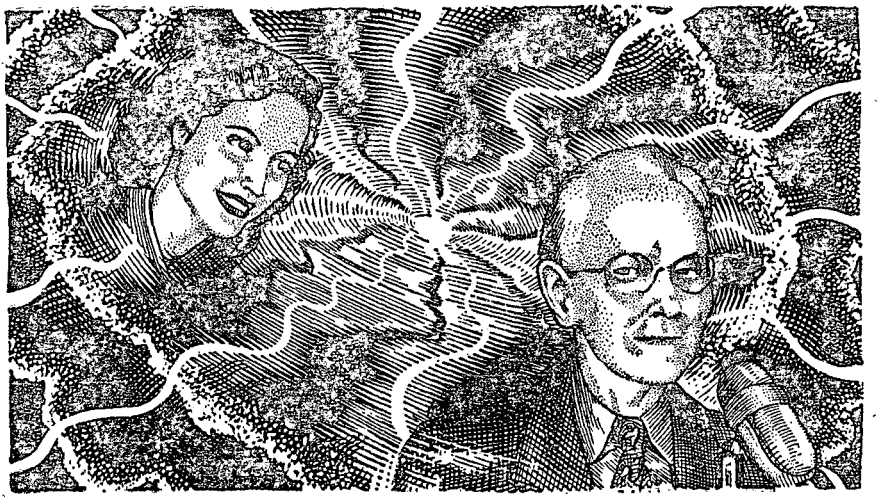

I heard a voice whisper in my ear. "Charlie, have you been up to room 918?". It was Bea Mahaffey's voice. I passed out again — right on the platform. As the lights blacked out, I knew I was going insane.

I DON'T THINK I ever had a body," he said. "Consequently, I haven't got a name, either. You can call me Joe, if a name is necessary."

I blinked at him. "Never had a body . . ." I began. Then I got mad; he was pulling my leg. "You've got one now!" I blurted.

"Not mine," he said calmly. "I just borrowed it."

"Borrowed it?" I asked, suspiciously. "From Joe, I suppose!" I was trying to be sarcastic, but missing the boat.

You see, it was hard to be sarcastic, the spot I was in. After all, when you hire a man to commit a murder, you just don't toss off witty quips like a radio comedian. And I wasn't a radio comedian — I was just Charlie Tanner, in charge of the Seventh World Science Fiction Convention at Cincinnati.

Of course, my murder was just a gag. It was supposed to provide us with some publicity for the convention, and maybe hit the headlines of the newspapers the day the convention opened. Maybe we might even get a radio spot, to say nothing of television. No previous convention had ever been televised. If I could work that, it would be a real feather in my cap. And I intended to work it — if I had to kill somebody . . . All in fun, of course. And that's why I hired this character who called himself Joe.

Funny how he showed up, too. It seemed to me that I'd just about got the idea for this fake murder when he popped up at the doorway.

"I'm from Mars," he said. "I hear

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MAHAFFEY'S MYSTERY

By FRANK PATTON

Charlie Tanner had a great idea to provide publicity for the convention; but when the man who could foretell the future came into the picture, the fake murder became a real one — yet, there was no corpse to be found!

you're putting on a convention. Just my line. In fact, I'm a fan. Up Portland way."

I rather liked the way he breezed in. Fans are like that. They bubble all over. Our whole gang is effervescent. Science fiction, to us, is an awful lot of fun. We don't take it too seriously, like *Time* once said we did . . . they covered the First convention and their story made us look like lunatics; real lunatics. Actually we hold these conventions every year so fans all over the world can get together and have a wonderfully good time. We laugh at ourselves, we build model rocket ships, we dress up like men from Venus, robots, and snake-women; and believe me, that masquerade party is a honey. How I'd like to get *that* televised! Fans, authors, editors and artists, and just plain science fiction readers get together to meet each other and become acquainted. It makes reading the magazines later a whole lot more fun. For instance, when you read a Rog Phillips story, you can say: "I saw him at the convention." I invited him into my study and we sat down.

"I certainly *am* putting on a convention!" I said. "Just pray that you never have the convention at Portland — you'll regret it all your days. It's more work than I dreamed . . ."

"Next convention will be at Portland," he said. "The vote at this one will be spirited, but will swing heavily toward Portland. Time the West got a break."

"You speak," I said heavily, "in a portentious manner."

He smiled. "You mean, like a prophet? Actually, I am. I can foretell the future."

Well, he was a science fiction fan. He'd just said so. You've got to shrug and accept things like this without getting excited. I accepted it. "Exactly," I said.

"No," he protested. "I mean it. I *can* foretell the future. For instance, you are going to ask me to commit a murder."

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I got up, walked over to the telephone, picked up the telephone book and tore it in half. I tossed the halves into the wastebasket. I walked over to him and stuck my nose right up against his and said:

"That's fine! Now I can stop trying to think of somebody to call for this job! You, of course, will accept the position as official murderer for the convention . . . having brought up the subject."

"You *were* calling up people to ask them that." He stated, grinning.

"Naturally!" I snapped. "And you *were* listening at my door, and that's how you knew!"

"I was listening," he admitted, "but not at your door. My eavesdropping covered a bit more distance than that . . . twenty-three hundred miles to be exact."

"Perhaps you'd rather be the corpse?" I asked invitingly.

He smiled even more broadly. "Getting under your skin?" he asked. "Perhaps I'm only joking . . ."

"If only you hadn't said perhaps . . ."

"That's it," he shrugged. "When a thing is, it is, isn't it?"

"You sound like Lester Del Ray," I lifted my eyebrows.

"Not me. That is, I'm not him. But he *is* a good writer, isn't he?"

"Admitted. But what I refuse to admit is your ability to foretell the future."

"Who would," he said as if it were the natural thing to say, and not like it was a question. He went on: "Anyway, the proof is in the pudding, and I'll prove it later on. Right now, I'm looking for a job. I don't mean I want to be paid, but you're putting on a convention, I've just gotten the idea I can be of some assistance, and I'm offering my services for what they are worth."

I told you he was a science fiction fan! All science fiction fans are regular guys; ready to pitch in on any job and help, and this was a tough job, and I needed the help.

"Knew you were kidding all the time," I laughed gaily. "And thanks for being a fine fellow — I need your help. You can be our murderer. Although where you'll get a body . . . say, what's your name anyhow?"

Well, that's when he made the crack about not having any body and consequently no name. I'd never thought of it that way. If a person hasn't a body, he couldn't have been named. Somehow, your name proves you have a body. You can't prove a ghost is real by giving his name — you can't prove he's really there. But if he has a body, and it's named, you have him dead to rights. He's Charlie Tanner, or Bea Mahaffey (speaking of bodies) or somebody else, like John W. Campbell, Jr.

"Precisely, Joe," I asked him with an enquiring turn of mind, "what do you call that 180-odd pounds sitting here before me if it isn't a body?"

"A body, of course. I told you I borrowed it?"

I reflected on that a moment. "Whose . . . is it?" My voice was a trifle hoarse.

"Can't tell you his name. He's fussy about it. Always threatening to sue somebody. If I told you, the

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name might be printed, and that would be libel. He'd sue."

"You're smarter than I am," I admitted. "But then, I never was much on this Chandler type dialogue. My character, Tumithak, was rather straight-spoken. He never indulged in these mental calisthenics. Well, you've proved you have a mind, so let's just drop it and get on with business?"

"Sure. That's what I came here for."

"You did?" I frowned.

"Drop it," he reminded me, laughing a bit.

"Yes. Now about that body — I mean, the corpse. If you are to be a murderer, you'll have to have a *corpus-delicti*. The way I had it figured, we'd put in a call to the police from the hotel just before the convention opens. We'll have news photographers on hand anyway, and of course, when they hear that there's been a fan murder upstairs, they'll rush up and get pictures. Then they'll rush out, rush over to their newspaper, and rush them into print in a jiffy. Meanwhile . . ."

". . . we admit it's only a fan stunt, and that somebody who had no business to, called the police, and that it was all an error . . ." he interrupted.

"Precisely," I said stiffly. "How'd you know?"

"I also know it wouldn't work."

"No?"

"No."

"You've got a better idea?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Then I turn over the whole thing to you. When you've worked it out, let me in on the details, and we'll coordinate our efforts. I'll handle the photographers and the publicity — you just arrange for a realistic-looking murder. Of course, we'll have to let the Hotel Metropole in on the stunt. They've been awfully nice up to now; wouldn't want them to get mad at us by pulling something they might not like."

Joe got up and stuck out his hand. I shook it. "Nice to meet you, Charlie," he said. "I'll call you in the morning."

"I'm sure glad to get this job off my hands," I said. "And I'm glad to meet you, too."

He walked around me, while I fussed with some papers on my desk. Then I remembered to caution him to be careful about the front door when he went out — it slams if you let it go. But he'd already left. The door was shut.

"The corpse will be in room 918," Joe said, over the telephone. It was a few hours before the convention was officially scheduled to begin. I was just about as frantic as a man can be, and I jotted down the room number almost absentmindedly.

"Okay. The photographers are due here about five. If you can manage spread the alarm about five-fifteen, that ought to break it just about right."

"Oh, no need for that," he said. "Remember, I told you that plan wouldn't work? I've made other arrangements. Your pictures will ap-

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pear all right, or my name isn't Joe."

"For all I know, it isn't," I said, beginning to get a little worried. Joe had persisted in retaining his anonymity pose. What gag he had in mind, I couldn't imagine—but almost every fan who'd shown up so far had someing in mind. For instance, Bob Tucker was being reported dead, which was rather a strange thing, because at this very moment he was sitting beside me, taking down notes for his Bloomington *News Letter*, which he distributes free to any fan who requests it. Tricks like these were harmless, of course, and right in line with convention festivities, but maybe Joe, whom I really didn't know, I was beginning to realize, might have something in mind that might not be so good.

There was a slight pause at the other end of the line. Finally he said: "But it really is Joe. And don't worry about any stunt I might pull. All I have in mind is that ability to foretell the future, I told you about. Said I'd prove it. Well, for a beginner, you might call Bea Mahaffey right now and ask her what her room number is at the hotel. She has just registered. It's 918."

"I'll do that," I promised, unthinkingly. "And thanks for the help. I'll be waiting for the newspapers to spread the story. That's what we need — front page stuff."

He hung up. I never heard from him again.

The convention opened with a bang. Press photographers' bulbs were popping, and reporters busily took notes, and grinned at the goings-on. I could see they were impressed.

"You know," said one of them, "there're a thousand mailmen also holding a convention in this same hotel, and you can't even hear them. But who could, over this uproar? These kids sure are having a lot of fun."

"That's it," I agreed. "We science fiction fans are fully aware that our sole mission in life is not to remake the world, but to take it as it is, and enjoy it. We're here because we like science fiction and we want to talk about it. Every year we do this, and every year it's going to be bigger and better. Next year it's going to be held at Portland, Ore. . . ." I stopped talking suddenly and swallowed hard. Why had I said that? Then, suddenly, I remembered something else, and I could feel the blood draining from my face.

Beside me, Louie Garner was looking at me in puzzled fashion. Louie's a fan from Washington, D. C. "Hey, Charlie," he said. "What's that about Portland? You know they haven't got a chance to swing the voting that way? It's going to be Washington. We've got the votes . . ."

I laughed a sort of sickly laugh. "Oh, just a hunch. Sort of a prediction, you might say."

"On what basis?" he persisted.

But I didn't stay to argue with him any further. I left Garner and the reporter standing with frowns on their faces while I dashed for the elevator.

"Room 918!" I gasped.

The girl running the elevator smiled

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at me. "I can take you to the ninth floor," she said, "but you'll have to make it to room 918 under your own power."

"Up!" I screamed at her. "Up. I've got to get up there . . . fast!"

She must have believed me, because she wiped the smile off her face, and slammed the door shut. We went up at full throttle, and all the way up she stared at me. And all the way up, I could hear Joe's voice, over the phone, saying *Bea Mahaffey . . . she's registering now . . . room 918 . . . the corpse will be in room 918 . . . Joe, that's really my name . . . I've made other arrangements . . .*

Other arrangements! Oh my God! Why had I been such a sap? I must have been hypnotized. This guy, Joe, was mad as a hatter. No telling what he'd done . . . Like rapid-fire, thoughts went through my mind. A man shows up mysteriously, I hand him an important assignment, he doesn't even tell me his name, he changes my plans, he runs the show to suit himself, he tells me things he calls predictions, and they are predictions that both Bea Mahaffey and a corpse are going to occupy the *same* room —

The door to the elevator slammed open and I ran out so fast I was past room 934 before I realized the room I wanted was the other direction.

"The other way!" the elevator operator was screaming at me. I wondered what she was screaming at. She couldn't know anything was wrong — or could she? Maybe my actions *were* convincing. At least I felt convinced. I was more scared than I had ever been in my life before. I could see the headlines now: TANNER INDICTED FOR SECOND DEGREE MURDER. It would all be my fault. And I didn't even know who my accomplice was. Wouldn't I sound convincing, in that witness chair, saying his name was Joe?

I pulled up to a halt before room 918 and tried to open the door. It was locked. I stepped back, slammed my shoulder hard against the panels. I bounced back. Charles Tanner is not Charles Atlas. Just as I was about to try to break my other shoulder, Rog Phillips stepped out of an adjoining room. He took one look at me, said: "You want to get in there?"

I nodded wordlessly. He stepped forward, and sort of walked through the door. He's six-foot-three and all muscle. The door burst inward and slammed against the telephone stand. I followed him in, and broke my other shoulder against his broad back. He had stopped dead in his tracks.

"Nobody here," he said.

I squirmed around him and looked. It was true. The room was empty. I sighed in relief. Then I saw the huge red stain in the middle of the carpet. I fainted.

When I came to, the door was closed. I felt almost drowned. Rog had dumped a pitcher of water on me. He was sitting now, looking at me quizzically, a very worried expression in his eyes.

"Charlie," he said, "what's going on here?"

"Murder," I said, feeling faint again.

"What!"

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"Not really," I said, getting weakly to my feet, my brain beginning to function once more. Suddenly I realized what a spot I was in, and I began to think cautiously.

"What do you mean, not really?"

"Oh, it's just a gag. We were going to pull a fake murder, get the photographers up here, get some front-page publicity for the convention."

"We?"

"Why — Joe and me . . ."

"Joe who?"

"Yeah, that's it," I said feeling the red creeping up my neck. What was Phillips trying to do — cross-examine me? Who did he think he was, anyway, the district attorney? "Joe who. I don't know Joe who. All I know is his name was Joe."

"Lots of fellows named Joe," said Rog Phillips shortly.

I laughed weakly. "That's right. But let's get out of here and back to the convention," I said. "So long as the gag fizzled, we might as well . . ."

"It's no gag," Rog said.

I could feel the floor wobbling again. Or maybe it was me. "No gag?" I asked.

"No, Charlie. That stain on that carpet isn't catsup. It's blood. And there's enough of it to account for almost every drop in an average man's body. He must have bled like a stuck pig. I've covered homicides in Portland, and I've never seen anything like this. Charlie, a man's been murdered in this room!"

"A man," I babbled, "or a woman! Oh, poor Bea . . ."

"A woman? Why do you say that? Was your planned corpse supposed to be a woman?"

"I don't know — that is, I'm afraid so. I'm terribly afraid so. Joe said it would be room 918, and he said Bea Mahaffey had registered for 918, and it wasn't until just a few minutes ago, I got the connection. I dashed up here, and you know the rest. Joe's from Portland, too, he said . . .

"Oh no!" Rog leaped to his feet. "Oh no, Charlie, no!"

"My sentiments, exactly," I said miserably. "But if she's dead, where's her body?"

"Charlie, there may be a body, but it's not hers!" Phillip's face was white, and his eyes burned right into me. "This is much worse than that. Joe! Oh my goodness!"

I could have thought of a better swearword, although I wasn't able to think of anything else coherently now. What was Phillips driving at? What did he know about Joe?

"You know Joe?" I asked him.

"No, I don't. I don't even know if he exists. At least he says he didn't . . ." Rog wasn't making sense, but —

I clutched at Phillips' arm. *"That's what he said to me!"* I almost screamed. *"He said he wasn't sure if he ever had a body.* What'd he mean, Rog. What'd he mean?"

"Did he also say he was from Mars?"

I stared. Then I remembered. "Yeah, he did!"

Something was trying to percolate through my brain, and all at once it perked. "Portland," I said coyly. "I get it all now, Rog. You, and Joe, both from Portland. Your idea of a

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gag. Giving poor, old, white-haired Charlie Tanner a rough time. Western humor . . ."

"I wish it was!" said Rog roughly. "But, let's not argue. You get downstairs and try to locate Bea Mahaffey right now. And keep on trying until you do locate her. If you can't find her . . ."

"I'll find her," I promised. "I'll find her. Because if I don't . . ."

"Don't faint again," said Rog. "The water pitcher's empty."

I didn't find her. I phoned her mother, and she told me she'd left for the convention hotel. I phoned Don Ford, my co-worker on the convention committee, and he said he hadn't seen her since she registered.

"When'd she register?" I asked quickly.

"Oh, about five-fifteen."

I hung up and dashed for the hotel registry desk. It was true. She was signed up for room 918. Right that minute I could feel the bars closing around me. I went into the convention hall in a sort of daze; proceedings were beginning, and I had to announce a few things. Then Erle Korshak, Chicago fantasy book publisher, would take over as master of ceremonies. As I took the mike, I saw Rog walk into the room. He was looking very sober.

I grabbed the mike in both hands and began speaking. The convention hall was crowded with over two-hundred fans and celebrities. I don't know exactly what I said, but midway through what I had prepared as an introductory speech, I heard a voice whisper in my ear.

"Charlie, have you been up to room 918?"

It was Bea Mahaffey's voice. No mistaking those dulcet tones. Bea has one of the most pleasing feminine voices I've ever heard. And I've listened to her for hours, just enjoying the well-modulated tones.

I whirled around on the small stage. I was alone. And Bea Mahaffey wasn't anywhere near me. She wasn't anywhere in the convention hall.

"No use looking for Miss Mahaffey," she said. *"She just isn't here, in the strict sense of the word. And I predict you won't see her again. Remember, I said I could predict the future? I'm starting right now."*

I passed out again — right on the platform. And as the lights blacked out, I knew one thing . . . I was crazier than a bedbug.

"It was her voice, I tell you," I insisted. "Bea Mahaffey, whispering right in my ear. And she referred to herself as 'Miss Mahaffey.' It was Joe talking, in Bea's voice. Fellas, I'm going crazy."

Author Jack Williamson was staring at me. "You and Shaver," he murmured.

I glared at him. "Don't associate me with those little underground people in his stories," I said. "I don't believe in the deros."

"You're hearing voices," author Lloyd Eshbach pointed out. "Isn't that what Shaver says?"

"It isn't true," I said frantically. "That stuff goes in *Amazing Stories*, but this is the Seventh World Science

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Fiction Convention. We are all here in fun—and this dero stuff isn't fun."

"Not if it gets into the papers. Charlie, that was the silliest idea for a publicity stunt I ever heard of. Whatever possessed you?"

"Possession," murmured Forrest J. Ackerman, who was a leading fan. "Effreets, demons . . ."

"You read too many *Weird Tales,*" I snapped. "Just because you have one of the few complete collections of WT . . ."

"Sorry," said Forrie. "But look, Charlie, you just aren't making sense. Let's analyze what you just said. You said that Bea Mahaffey's voice was whispering to you, and that a character named Joe was using her voice. WT or not, the only explanation possible to an asinine statement like that is possession — and I don't believe in possession, even if it is nine points in the law."

"You don't believe me?" I asked, ominously, or as ominously as I could manage to sound.

"Why should he?" whispered Joe, in Bea's voice, in my ear.

I jumped. "Hear that?" I howled.

All at once a long, eerie ululation sounded through the room. It rose to a spine chilling crescendo, then wavered off in an uncanny way that reminded me of a dying ghost, if a ghost can die.

George O. Smith screamed.

"Shut up, George!" yelled Dave MacInnes. "You damn fool, that's only Goldberg Soda singing."

"Goldberg Soda?" gasped George, coming down out of high C.

"Yeah, my dog!" He slapped his hand against his knee, and a bedraggled, floppy, black Scottie inched his way out from under the bed, tail wagging furiously.

Rog Phillips cut in. "He wasn't singing *America The Beautiful,*" he said significantly.

"Yeah," I cut in likewise. "What about that, Dave? Goldberg doesn't sing anything but *America The Beautiful,* and only when somebody sings it with him. How come he sings alone now?"

"Right, old chappie," said Ted Carnell. Ted's from England. He edits *New Worlds* over there. Came all the way to America for the convention.

Dave looked puzzled. "That's true," he admitted. "Maybe he did hear something."

"He did," said Rog. "Take my word for it. And maybe I'd better explain, so you'll know just what's going on, and how serious it is."

"You ought to be able to explain it," said Forrie. "You seem to be able to explain everything. Take for instance that time at LA when you . . ."

"Let's drop that stuff," I said. Forrie and Rog have a sort of feud on and they take every opportunity to air it—so often that I suspected they did it only to get into the limelight, and actually are the best of friends. "If you fellows don't know it, I stand a very good chance of spending the rest of my days in jail for murder."

Goldberg Soda let loose with a howl that shook me to my bones. When he quieted down, there was

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silence in the room you could really hear.

"Murder . . ." faltered George. "I think my mother wants me on the phone . . ."

Forrie pushed him back into his seat. "This is beginning to sound interesting," he said. "You said before it was only a fake corpse."

"It was supposed to be," I said miserably. "But Rog tells me it's real blood . . ."

"Oh, he does, huh? In that case, I'll believe it when . . ."

"When you taste it?" Rog interrupted. "Well, it doesn't *taste* like catsup . . ."

"How do you know?" flashed Forrie.

Rog grinned. "Tasted it," he said.

That grin did it. The tension in the whole room lifted as we all laughed at the sally. We looked toward Rog.

"What is it you know about this mystery?" asked Dave.

"Well," Rog began, "it dates back to a couple of years ago in Portland. I was visiting with Jack and Dorothy de Courcy. One day Jack said he could prove that Mars was inhabited, or at least, had been inhabited not so many thousands of years ago.

"Naturally, that interested me. Jack's a strange fellow, but he's quite inpressive. And he'd made a prediction of a personal nature that entailed something he couldn't possibly have known or arranged, and it came out to the last detail. So, I felt that when he said something, it carried weight.

"The conversation went something like this . . ."

"Mars is, or was, inhabited," said Jack. "And at least one of its inhabitants came to this planet. I don't know how he did it, but he got here. And he's here now."

"He is?"

"Yes."

"Where?" I asked bluntly.

"Right in this room."

I laughed. "Okay, Jack, I'll bite. This ought to be an interesting gag." I sat back in my chair and watched him, wondering what he had up his sleeve. Jack used to be a magician, you know. What he can do with a deck of cards . . . "

"He's invisible," said Jack.

"Obviously," I said, glancing around, "if he's in this room."

Jack looked at me quizzically. "Just what would you require as proof that he's here, other than actually seeing him?"

"Well, I could talk to him."

"Yes, you could. But how would you know it was really a Martian you were talking to?"

"I'd know. I think I could dream up a few questions only a Martian could answer. If he answered them, I'd believe you."

"I hope you know what you're asking," said Jack. "What if I prove this to you? How about your peace of mind?"

"I'll be crazy, just like you," I grinned. "If you can stand the knowledge, so can I."

Jack got up, walked into the next room. In three minutes he walked

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back into the room and sat down.

I stared at him curiously, waiting for his next move. All at once I looked at his eyes, and I got a very uncomfortable feeling. I started to say "Jack . . ." then stopped. It wasn't Jack facing me. Looking out of those eyes was another entity. You can believe me or not, it makes no difference to me; but that's the feeling I got, and it was indescribable. I just *knew* it wasn't Jack any more.

"I believe you have some questions to ask?" he said, smiling a little.

His voice sounded different somehow. It didn't have an accent, but I got that feeling of something alien in its timbre just the same.

"What's your name?" I asked abruptly.

"That's a good place to begin," he said. "But to tell you the truth, I haven't a name. But if you require one, just call me Joe."

This was going to be fun. In a battle of wits, I felt that Jack would come off second best. Jack's a good guy, but he's no Titan.

"How old are you?"

"Again I don't know. But I do know that it's more than two thousand years. I remember the crucifixion of Christ. I was there."

"In the flesh?"

"No," he admitted. "I never did have a body."

"No body?"

"No. We Martians haven't a body in the sense that you Earthmen have. I might best explain it by saying that our bodies are made up of secondary atoms, perhaps similar to the substance you Earth people call ecoplasm. These secondary atoms have a nucleus and are true atoms, but are beyond the physico-chemical scale of matter. Actually, if your science was advanced enough, you'd know that every physico-chemical atom has a secondary atom in its makeup, interrelated so that without the secondary atom, life would be impossible. There has been some argument among mystics among you that it is a mysterious substance similar to the secondary atom which is responsible for life, and which exists after the primary atom has returned to the primal matter from which it came."

"Just what is the result of a collision between two particles of negative matter?" I shot at him.

He gave me the correct answer.

I knew the answer was correct, because nobody but myself knows there *is* such a thing as negative matter, that is, nobody except myself and Ray Palmer, who knows a great deal more than people give him credit for knowing. Palmer printed my "ether drift" experiment in *Amazing Stories*, which was one outcome of my new theory concerning the problem of the nature of the universe as it really is. This experiment was later confirmed by Professor Herman Fricke, acting under the American Military Government in Germany. Professor Fricke was chief physicist to Kaiser Wilhelm, and much persecuted by Hitler because of his brilliant mind. His confirmation proves beyond all reasonable doubt that an ether drift does exist, contrary to the assumption of Michelson-Morley, who performed their experiment only in a

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horizontal plane.

"What is the speed of the ether drift, and in what direction?" I asked Joe.

"Approximately sixty-five miles per second at sea level, in a vertical direction."

"How do you assume your present occupancy of Jack's body?

"With his permission. Otherwise it might be impossible."

"Might?"

"Yes. I have long felt that there was a way to acquire a body without permission, and I've made some progress along those lines, but I will need to experiment quite extensively to iron out a few difficulties that prevent it."

"What sort of progress?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Don't underrate me."

"I don't."

"If you are assuming that amalgamation of your own secondary atoms with the secondary atoms of some living person is the method, you are in for disappointment."

"Not so disappointing. For instance, what is occurring here, with Jack's permission, is merely *association* of my secondary atoms with his. Amalgamation, I agree, is impossible. Even in secondary atoms, matter cannot occupy space already occupied by the same type of matter. But it can be ousted from its space . . . "

"That's *possession!*" I said sharply.

He felt my animosity, and his face hardened.

"Mr. Phillips," he said. "I see now that you do not feel friendly toward me. I'm afraid we have nothing in common. Good day, Mr. Phillips."

He got up and stalked from the room, and as I watched him go, I realized I had made an enemy, and the sweat broke out on my brow. How terribly Jack had proved his statement! I sat back, trembling.

Then Jack came back into the room, and there was a bewildered look on his face.

"What happened?" he said. "I've always been able to see and hear what was going on, up to now."

"Jack," I said. "If you're smart, you'll never let Joe take over again."

"Possession!" breathed Forrie, as Rog finished speaking. "Heavens, this is really serious! Charlie, we've got to find Bea!"

I felt faint. Rog Phillips' words had struck at me with physical force. The quiet way in which he enunciated each word, the conviction that shone from his eyes, the aura of truth that emanated from him, had struck fear deep at my vitals.

"He's done it, then!" I said. "What you mean, Rog, is that Joe has learned how to take over a body by force, and oust its original occupant?"

"I'm afraid so."

"He certainly picked a body!" said George.

We glared at him, and he shrank into a corner.

"Yes," said Rog. "Which proves another thing to me."

"And what's that?" I asked, feeling an even more dreadful blow was to fall.

"That Joe is insane."

"Wait a minute!" said Forrie, who

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had been staring at Rog. "I can blow holes in this thing right now."

I whirled on him. "How? For God's sake, Forrie, how? If you can show me even one little hole to crawl through, I'll . . ."

Rog was staring at Forrie, his brow knit. "Yes, Forrie, what's the hole you can detect in this thing?"

"I think the whole thing's a hoax."

Rog bristled. "It is?"

"Yes. If Joe took over Bea's body, how do you account for that pool of blood upstairs? As I understand it . . ."

"Stop it!" I shrieked. "Forrie, you're being no help at all. That makes it worse than possession, it makes it murder for sure. Nobody'll be able to explain that blood! I'm a gone goose!"

"Maybe not," said Rog quietly.

I turned to him, but it was with little hope. Forrie, in trying to discredit Rog's possession theory, had brought up a far more vicious fact—that was real blood on the floor upstairs. Beside that, possession was a mere nothing. Nobody, or nothing, could possess a dead body—and if Bea was dead . . .

Rog looked under the bed. "Here, Goldberg," he said coaxingly. Come on out. We've got work for you."

Goldberg peered out cautiously, saw me, and howled pitifully, then crept back to his hideaway.

Rog looked at me. "He senses Joe," he said. And if he does, that means Joe isn't in Bea's body at the present moment . . ."

"And also means that it's quite possible that is her blood upstairs," I groaned.

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Let's make a test. We'll use Goldberg. You stay here, Charlie, and we'll take Goldberg upstairs and let him give his verdict."

Dave looked puzzled.

"How?"

"Simple. If Goldberg smells Joe's presence in that room, then it will be a bad sign. But if he doesn't, it means that Joe had nothing to do with the blood in that room. And if he had nothing to do with it, he isn't responsible."

"Wait a minute," said Carnell. "Over in England we've had several mysterious cases that might have been called possession. In them, the persons affected claimed to be somebody else, and in one case, committed suicide while under the interloping influence. All this might prove . . ."

". . . is that Bea didn't commit suicide under the influence of Joe," finished Rog. "If she did, Goldberg will howl!"

"Goldberg's even better than that," said Dave. "Have we something that belonged to Bea? If so, let's give Goldberg a sniff of it here, and then if that blood is Bea's, he'll identify it. As a matter of fact, he'll lead us right to it, once we let him loose in that hall."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Rog.

"Awful!" I said, slumping down in a chair. "You won't need to tell me to stay down here, Rog. I couldn't watch what that dog does if my life depended on it."

"Which I'm afraid it does," said

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Forrie.

Why does Forrie always say things like that?

The next fifteen minutes were hell for me. I sat alone in the room waiting for them to come back with the dog. What would the dog do? Would he prove Rog's theory of possession? Would he identify the blood as that of Bea Mahaffey? Would he do *both?*

I stood up groggily as the door burst open.

"Come on!" said Rog. "Hurry it up, Charlie, we've got to get out of here!"

I felt the world going around. But I stood up stiffly and flung off his hand on my arm.

"I'm not going."

"Not going? What in the dickens is the matter with you?"

"I'm guilty, and I'll stay and face the music. Besides, I couldn't get ten miles. Everybody knows me, and my description would be in all the papers. I'll take my medicine."

"You jackass," said Forrie acidly, "cut out the dramatics. We've got to follow Goldberg on the trail. Rog has a brilliant idea, and Dave is waiting for us at the front door. For your information, Goldberg did not identify the blood as Bea's."

"But he *did* howl!" put in Carnell.

"He . . . didn't? He . . . did?" I was confused. "But . . . but that means . . . it means the blood was . . . but it *couldn't* be! Joe doesn't have a body."

"No," said Rog. "He doesn't. But he almost had. We haven't time for explanations now. We've got to find Bea. Goldberg will lead us to her."

"How?" I screamed, as they dragged me out the door. "Not by following Joe's scent?"

"By both of them!"

They dragged me to the lobby of the hotel, and I struggled to compose myself, so that nothing would be suspected. I would not have needed to, because I realized at once that no matter how nutty we looked, we would only look normal to the hotel staff.

Dave was at the door, and Goldberg was surging at a leash as though he wanted to fly. "Come on," Dave said urgently. "Goldberg's good, but not superdog. This trail's bound to grow cold in this traffic!"

He let Goldberg have his head, and the dog scampered in his ridiculous way out through the door and into the street. We followed as fast as we could. In a couple of blocks, I was panting. I repeat, I am Charles Tanner, not Charles Atlas. My muscles are mostly in my head.

All at once Goldberg skidded around a corner, and whirled into a doorway. It was the doorway of the Netherlands Plaza hotel. We all dashed in after him, and straight up to the registration desk. Dave halted there, holding Goldberg, who was now making lunges toward the elevators.

"What do we do now?" asked Dave of Rog.

Rog spoke to the desk clerk. "Have you a Bea Mahaffey registered here? Must have registered sometime between 5:15 and now."

The clerk consulted his records. When he came back, he shook his

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head. "Sorry. Nobody by that name registered at all."

"May I see the registry?" asked Rog.

The clerk looked hesitant. "That's rather irregular . . ."

Rog dug his hand in his pocket and came up with a five-dollar bill. "Just a glance," he said coaxingly.

The clerk nodded. "Certainly, sir. Always glad to accommodate."

He produced the record, and Rog scanned the cards carefully.

"This all?" he asked, disappointedly.

"Every one."

Rog looked at them again. "Only one woman," he said. "A Miss Darling. What is her room number?"

"It's right there . . ."

"Oh yes. Room 1212. Thank you, but there's little chance that this is the lady I wish to see." He handed the clerk the five-dollar bill and turned to us.

"Let's go up to the mezzanine and take the elevator from there," he said lowly. "We'll attract less attention that way."

We proceeded up the stairway, and made our way to the elevators. Goldberg was prancing around madly, his ears flopping in his anxiety. He had lost the scent now, and it was bothering him.

When the elevator came, he padded into it, and sat panting, apparently disgusted with the turn of affairs.

We got off at floor twelve and Dave began pulling Goldberg along the corridor in the direction of room 1212. All at once Goldberg began to howl, and Dave clapped a hand over his muzzle. Goldberg looked rueful and shut up; but he tugged determinedly toward room 1212, and when he got to it, stood trembling before it. All at once his tail dropped between his legs and stayed there, while he whimpered softly.

Rog tried the door, then, barking orders at us, had us guard the approaches. "Don't let anybody past," he said. "We'll probably all go to jail for this, but it's got to be done!"

Once more I had the opportunity of seeing Rog Phillips walk through a door that wasn't open. I followed him in and clapped a hand to my mouth to stifle a scream. There on the bed lay Bea Mahaffey, and her face was white as wax. She looked dead.

"She's not dead," said Rog swiftly, divining my thoughts. But he ignored me from then on, leaning over the bed. The waxen lips moved.

"Damn you, Rog Phillips. You're too late . . ." *It was Joe's voice.*

"Not yet!" said Rog hoarsely.

He grabbed Bea Mahaffey by the hair and lifted her to a sitting position. He slapped her face with his free hand, right and left, repeatedly, until I thought he'd break her neck.

"Bea!" he yelled. "Bea Mahaffey! Come back!"

He kept slapping her face, almost brutally, while I stood there, reeling with shock and terror. Then I saw color coming back into her cheeks. All at once she cried out, and it was Bea Mahaffey's voice. Her eyes flashed open, and she stared at Rog, just as he slapped her again.

"You beast!" she screamed at him. "Let go of me!"

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Rog breathed a deep sigh and stepped back. "Shut up!" he said almost savagely, "and listen to me. Do you know who Joe is?"

She stared at him. "Joe? Why he's . . ." She gasped. "He's a horrid thing . . . he tried . . . tried to . . ."

"Exactly! And you mustn't let him! He's trying to take over your body. *Don't let him!*"

Bea Mahaffey fainted. So did I.

We were all sitting in Don Ford's little room at the Metropole, taking turns sitting beside Bea Mahaffey to assure ourselves she was alive and well. She was. Even I can testify to that, and don't make any cracks about my white hair.

Rog was explaining what had happened.

"Joe was on the verge of taking over Bea's body permanently when we broke down the door. You see, he's really from Mars, and Mars, if we are to judge from Joe, is inhabited by what we'd call 'shadows' if there was a word to describe them. They are living beings, all right, but composed of a rarefied type of matter best described as sub-atomic. The bodies of Martians are apparently composed of a secondary type of atomic matter which would be perfectly impalpable to us of Earth.

"Science has hinted at the existence of matter of this type, and I believe they will someday make important discoveries in that respect.

"Anyway, Joe has managed to traverse the void between the two planets somehow, perhaps on a comet, or meteorite that passed close to Mars, close enough for him to hitch a ride, and also close enough to Earth so that he could drop off as it went by. Or maybe it even hit the Earth. Joe, with his secondary atomic structure, wouldn't, couldn't be killed that way. It is my belief that he is immortal, anyway. Can secondary atomic matter die? That's a question I'd like to investigate myself . . .

"It is perfectly true, then, that Joe, who seems to have forgotten how he got here, never had a body. He never had a physico-chemical body like ours, composed of primary atoms, which are much larger than secondary atoms. It may also be true that he was present at the crucifixion of Christ. If so, he's been here much more than two thousand years.

"During that time, Joe must often have wished he had a body, so that he could take part in this physico-chemical world of ours in actuality, rather than by proxy by what is termed 'obsession' and 'possession.' When I first met him in Portland, he was beginning to discover a means to achieve this end. With his attempt on Bea, he apparently had found a way, and was putting it into effect—for the second try.

"The first try was up in Bea's room in this hotel. He failed, because his attempt resulted in a partial synthesis *outside* the body. The blood is considered to be the 'creator' of the flesh, and certainly it is from the blood that all the necessary building blocks of flesh are derived. So, when he attempted his theft of a body, he attempted it without first being in full possession of his victim. Hence the

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pool of blood.

"Of course, having failed that first time, he had to get Bea out of here, as he knew the reporters and cameramen would be coming up with Charlie. So he had her go to the Netherlands Plaza and register under the name of Darling.

"Then, because he needed time to gain strength for his second attempt, he left her there, under a hypnotic spell, and came over to have a little fun tormenting Charlie, whom he intended as the victim in all this. That is, he had wanted to picture Charlie's consternation and horror when he realized that Bea was no longer Bea, but Joe, and with no ability to do anything about it.

"But Goldberg spoiled his little plan, by leading us to him. Thank God we were in time."

George looked at Bea and nodded. Then he looked around apprehensively. "Does that mean Joe is dead?"

I looked quickly at Rog, and paled at what I saw in his face.

"No," said Rog quietly. "As I said, I don't think secondary matter can die. If you want my opinion, I have a hunch that Joe will be with us at the Portland Convention."

"I'm not going to any more conventions," said George hastily.

Rog looked thoughtful. "I am," he said. "I'd like to meet Joe again. There are a few experiments I'd like to make with secondary atomic matter, and so far as I know, Joe's the only secondary atomic matter available on Earth . . ."

I got up, walked over to Bea Mahaffey and took her hand in mine. "You can have him, Rog. As for me, give me Bea anytime. She's primary!"

THE END

LETTERS

(Continued from page 121)

Rex Shaw

Purchased my first copy of OTHER WORLDS today. My first, but your second, number. Read your editorial with interest. Marked your thoughts on *Amazing Stories* being in its heyday B. S. (Before Shaver).

Agree on the above.

Turned to the inside of your back cover, to find "Dickie boy" scheduled for your next issue. Wha Hoppen? Howsomeever, Shaver notwithstanding, enclosed you'll find three skins for 12 issues.

OTHER WORLDS appears to be, at first glance, the closest thing to *Astounding* I've seen. Just emulate the story quality of that magazine, and you're in like O'Hoolihan.

511½ Geneva Street,
Glendale 6, Calif.

As to that B.S., we were only quoting Howard Browne, of Amazing Stories. *Actually, we think Shaver is a fine writer. We intend to prove this by directing him as he should be directed. We feel that without his mystery, he will become a top name. Too much emphasis has been placed on his "mystery" as the drawing card of his stories. We, as editors, don't believe that. We want to prove it, and we want to prove it by making you fellows who are most "against" him admit it in writing. So, let's assume that Richard S. Shaver is a brand new name in science fiction and start judging from that. Read his "Lady" in this issue, and next issue, his "The Palace Of Darkness." As for* Astounding, *we will emulate to a degree—that is, we'll present some of that type of stories, and try to do it*

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better! Maybe we can't, but we have a hunch we'll come awfully close.—Ed.

Robert W. Carr

You really surprise me. I thought when I bought the first issue of OW a few months ago that it was just a flash in the pan, however, I was wrong. May I tender my congratulations? I have been reading stf since I discovered Jules Verne and Burroughs hidden away on a back shelf in the public library in England. In your second issue there is something missing. I cannot put my finger on it, but I was left with a feeling of being stranded. All the stories were good, but I enjoyed *Descent From Mera* best.

P. O. Box 21,
Bridgeport, Conn.

Now you've left us stranded! What on earth could have been missing? Well, maybe it was Bradbury? He's in this issue! Or maybe it was Van Vogt? He's in next issue! We have an idea this issue won't leave you stranded.—Ed.

Michael Varady

Congratulations on your second issue of OW. It is a vast improvement over the first one, which was great in its own right. You seem to be the only editor on the market who says he wants suggestions and then puts those suggestions into act immediately. All I have to say is viva Webster!

The cover was wonderful compared to the first issue. It was perhaps a little too bright, but you'll probably continue using bright colors to attract attention until you've a larger circulation. I hope you'll cut down on the glariness after that.

The letter section was good, and so were the personals, although I was originally against that section.

The inside illos were fine and I hope you'll keep them that way.

(1) *This Time* . . . While not nearly as good as Phillips' *The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde,* or his *Time Trap,* this was still a masterpiece in its own right. By the way I hope Century Novels will bring some more original fanta-science novels out in that 25c form.

(2) *Descent From Mera.* Swell story. But what makes you think this was fantasy? It seemed to be straight stf to me. More of Millen Cooke, please.

(3) *To Give Them Welcome.* Clever idea, and well-written, but does definitely not deserve first place as you suggested.

(4) *Sons Of The Serpent.* God, how I hate time-travel stories! Nicely written, though.

(5) *The Fatal Word.* This started out as a good professional job, but made two very amateurish errors. The first one is in plotting: the many Tibetans are screaming away the death-word; their ears may have been stuffed with something, but no matter how much wadding they had, the vibrations of all those voices at once would be sure to get to the sound organs. The second error is in the writing: the reader does not know that Hedin is stone deaf; he thinks the man is perfectly normal. Then, at the most convenient time possible for Hedin, it develops that his sound organs are terrible. This leaves the reader shocked, with the feeling that he has been tricked. The idea should have been implanted in the very first part of the story, not the last. More short-shorts. I hope you're planning to have serials when you get on a monthly basis—which should be done as soon as possible.

How about having, as in *Weird Tales,* the name of the artist printed right underneath his art job? At least, then, we know whom to pan, and whom to rave about.

210 South Ave., 57,
Los Angeles 42, Calif.

If we try to get top-notch covers, you won't mind if we try to make them vivid, will you? When we get a cover that is good, but isn't vivid, we'll use it, never fear. We won't turn anything down just because it's "gotta be red."

Century Novels will continue to bring out science novels similar to Time Trap.

We'll institute that practice of putting the artist's name beneath his work, in the May issue. It's a good idea. Thanks. By the time you readers get through, we'll have a magazine perfect in all respects, we hope—Ed.

Emory H. Mann

Well, you did it again—another darn good issue. Congratulations!

Certainly glad to hear Ray Palmer is on the team. Since reading that Ray was leaving *Amazing Stories,* I've been wondering where to look for the new magazine that he was going to be connected with. Now I know!

(Continued on page 150)

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The tiny creature was carried carefully from the ship and deposited on the ground at a safe distance from the crater. Then the visitors departed . . .

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THE WEE BONNIE POUPON

By F. ANTON REEDS

Blindingly the lightning came—an hour later it came again. The next morning the Gorglunds found a "bonnie poupon" beside a great crater in the forest—and civilization faced its judgment!

YOU take the boat from the foot of the lake to the Gorglund's place. The trees keep getting thicker and the population thinner as you near the head of the lake. By the time you get to Gorglund's the entire population of a fifty-square-mile area couldn't pull a Ford pick-up truck out of a two-foot ditch. Nobody ever knew why it was called Ma Gorglund's. There *was* a Mr. Gorglund, but Ma Gorglund had no children.

It was not really a camp. I was the only paying guest they ever accepted. Raoul Sharbonnet, the stubby trapper, introduced me on a boat trip. After that I simply invited myself back.

I liked the place. Nothing seemed to change from year to year. Even Ma Gorglund and her husband grew older only very slowly.

But that fall, fifteen years ago, Ma Gorglund herself met me outside the cabin.

"Take 'a your boots," she told me. "The wee bonnie *poupon* is sleeping."

The Gorglunds may once have been Scandinavian for all I know, but they spoke a weird jargon of patois, lumberman's English, stray bits of Scotch, Irish, and odds and ends of Indian dialects.

"The *poupon*?" I asked.

"*Oui*," she said, bobbing her head with a broad smile. "The wee childers the lightning brought."

"The lightning?"

But it was old Gorglund who explained about the lightning after the three of us had stood over the crude little packing-box crib of Ma Gorglund's *poupon*.

My reaction at first sight of the infant must surely have offended the Gorglunds had they noticed. But both of them were too happily intent upon that little form within the crib to pay any attention to me. I was amazed at their calm acceptance of that strange thing in the crib until it occurred to me that, living as they did so far apart from their fellowmen, it must have

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been decades since either of them had seen a normal child. In their delight at having "a wee bonnie one" of their own they were quite willing, apparently, to overlook a great deal.

There was something almost repulsive about the wizened little creature. Its puckered little face was seamed and wrinkled. I could imagine no normal day-old child as tiny as this one which, by Mrs. Gorglund's own account, was at least three weeks old. But the oddest of all was the child's hair and skin. The hair was blue and coarse and the child's skin was that neutral greenish color of long-tarnished copper.

"He's no ours," old Gorglund said.

"No?" I said, for want of a better answer.

" 'Twas the lightning brought him," Gorglund told me.

"The blue lightning," Ma Gorglund added.

" 'Twere no a storm that nicht," old Gorglund said. " 'Twere a bonnie nicht — the nicht of the blue lightning."

"Mais oui," his wife agreed. "Most of a bonnie nicht. And then—pouf—the lightning."

"Twice," Gorglund insisted.

"Oui, oui," Ma Gorglund said, her head bobbing. "First the lightning. Then maybe one hour, maybe two, and—pouf—the lightning again."

"That was when you found the—the baby?" I asked.

"Not then," Ma Gorglund said. "In the morning."

"Come morning," said Gorglund, "we find him baby near hole the lightning make. Come along, I show you."

"I stay with *petit enfant,"* his wife told us.

Gorglund and I shrugged into our mackinaws and he led the way through the early autumn woods, already covered with the first light snowfall. Suddenly I realized that the smell of something very like sulphur, though not quite sulphur either, hung in the tangy air. Old Gorglund saw me sniffing the wind like a startled moose and nodded his head vigorously, but strode on without speaking.

Suddenly we were there.

No snow could hide that yawning hole blasted in the rocky earth as though by a giant torch. At the bottom of that blackened pit, within its very center, was a smaller, deeper depression—as though some heavy, upright object had rested there.

"Lightning do that," Gorglund said.

A conviction—an almost unbelievable conviction—was growing within me.

"When—when the lightning struck, was there any—any thunder?" I asked, and almost hoped that he would say no.

"Big thunder," the old fellow said. His forehead creased into a frown. "Most funny thunder," he added. "But big—most big."

"Did you see the lightning?" I asked.

"Just through window. Is blue—pouf. We think big storm. Everything we need in cabin, no need to go out in storm. But bye 'n bye cabin get hot. Everything is hot and smell

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funny. We think maybe so lightning start big fire in woods. I go out to look. But is nothing. Nothing at all. Just night."

"When the — lightning — came again," I asked, "did you go out then?"

"I am afraid," old Gorglund said. "There is the heat again and the smell. But I am afraid. I stay in cabin."

"And the baby?"

"In morning I find baby. Maybe hundred, maybe hundred-fifty yards from hole lightning make. Is very cold. Most cold. But baby no mind that. Baby not cold. Is funny, that."

There was one more question I had to ask old Gorglund, but even as I asked it, I knew what the answer would be.

"Did you notice anything—anything odd—about the ground?"

The old man looked at me queerly.

"Were there any—footprints?" I blurted, and saw Gorglund recoil as though he were suddenly afraid.

"Funny you ask that," he said. "Yes, is footprints. Not barefoots prints. Like shoes, little shoes."

For a moment he stood staring at that yawning hollow in the earth, swinging his head slowly, as though still loath to believe his own memories.

"It look," he said at last, "like maybe a lot of little childers make big picnic here."

I did not stay long at the cabin that fall.

On the afternoon of my departure I found myself alone for an hour in the cabin. I had avoided the child as much as possible, but now I went to the crib and looked down at that tiny bit of wrinkled green life.

"I'm less than a thousand miles from home," I mused. "But you — you must be millions of miles from your birthplace. It will be very lonely here for you. None of us here will ever really understand how lonely!"

The strange infant wakened and looked up at me. It smiled and for just a second there seemed to be a depth of understanding in its tiny black eyes.

I know there are people who would rush to recount such a tale as that. I did not. For one thing, in my home town I am a prosaic merchant of hardware and farming equipment. There would be no reason to believe my story, and every reason to believe me mad. Fifteen years ago my position was even more precarious, for at the time I was a young merchant just getting on my feet, with a good deal at stake. So I said nothing.

There was another reason for my silence. Back there in the commonplace streets of my prairie town it was harder to believe the fancies which had seemed such certainties at the head of a lonely lake in the northern woods.

When I went back the next fall I carried a trim painted crib from my stockshelves and a bundle of colorful children's picture books. The books seemed an odd sort of gift for a year-old child, but I excused myself easily.

"Business is getting better," I told myself. "No knowing when I'll be

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able to get back again. This way the books will always be there for the kid when he gets old enough for them."

But it was not the crib which brought wreaths of smiles to Ma Gorglund's round face when she saw the lake boat coming and met me at the rotting little landing.

"Books!" she cried. "He'll like that, the wee one."

I must have registered my surprise pretty plainly, for Mrs. Gorglund smiled broadly.

"He remembers you," she said. "He talk about you now and then."

"Talks?" I exclaimed.

"Like fur buyer," said Mrs. Gorglund, chuckling at her joke until her body shook.

As I followed her to the cabin I had an eerie feeling that I should have been much happier shooting ducks at home on Doc Watson's pond.

I was relieved when the child said nothing.

"Bashful," Ma Gorglund explained.

Her wee childers had certainly grown. He stood, I should judge, about two feet tall. The little face was not quite so wizened now and he had something of the bearing of a four or five-year-old boy. All evening he sat on a footstool old Gorglund had made from a soapbox. For an hour he seemed absorbed in the books, taking them up one after another and turning the pages slowly. At the end of an hour he put them in a neat pile at his side and for the balance of that unearthly, disquieting evening he sat staring at me, watching my every move and listening intently to my every word.

When I rose at last to go to my bunk, he rose too and addressed me in a thin, clear voice.

"My sincerest gratitude for the volumes," he said. "They were most interesting."

I am not usually a rude man. But I rushed past that little figure and into my leanto bedroom.

It was dawn before I dared to let my mind ponder the questions that puzzled and tormented me. Perhaps it was only that I had read too many stories of fantasy since boyhood, perhaps it was the strangeness of the Gorglunds and their cabin where nothing seemed impossible, but the answers to those questions came to me almost as easily as the questions themselves. They were satisfactory answers to me then, though I knew they would seem less assuring when I had returned again to shopkeeping in the prairie town a thousand miles away.

To ask this year-old creature to behave like a year-old human child was, I reasoned, as stupid as to expect a kitten to follow the life-pattern of a zebra colt, or a year-old chimp to have the thought-processes of a year-old grizzly cub. I tried to remember all the stories I had heard and read of infant prodigies. But I knew that the Gorglund's child of the lightning was not an infant prodigy. His thoughts must be the normal ones of an infant of such a race as Earthmen might become in another hundred-thousand years.

In the light of that reasoning, the little creature's use of such perfect

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English was not so grotesque as it had seemed the night before. Unworldly, yes. But, having guessed at the secret of the creature's birth, I must learn to expect the unworldly in all that it did. From the uncouth jargon of the Gorglund's, aided perhaps by some infant memory of my own presence a year before, the greenish-hued creature must have deduced the true nature of the language as Earthmen reconstruct a prehistoric giant from the knowledge of a handful of bones.

It was a comforting chain of thought and I left it at that.

When I returned the next year I had added proof of the truth of my conjectures. The child had aged. Now, going into his third year, he was a little better than three feet tall. But it was not a matter of height. This was a ten-year-old boy who greeted my return with real welcome, and I realized that four of our earthly seasons must equal five growth-years on that faraway world from which he came.

Rumors of the odd child at the Gorglund cabin had reached the village at the foot of the lake and I was asked about "the old couple's Indian baby." But the Gorglunds were the sort of "originals" that turn up now and then everywhere, and they were as out-of-place in the lake country as they would have been in Winnipeg or Cleveland or Somerset. So the rumors from the head of the lake were taken with a grain of salt by the villagers.

This year I'd brought along a whole case of books. Mrs. Muller, our town librarian, looked at me rather oddly when I asked for a list of fifty books "covering the whole field of human thought and science." But she had complied and I had brought them along to the cabin. Those books had cost a good deal of money, but I was growing a little fond of that ugly billiken.

But the realization that the little fellow had already wasted his whole childhood there at the cabin brought added pity for his loneliness. It was time he had something more than books. Business had been more than good and this year I had ignored the lake boat and rented an antiquated motorboat at the village. It was a cantankerous, puttery affair, but it was no job at all for a dealer in hardware and farm machinery to keep it running.

So I suggested a trip to the village.

It was no easy matter to get Ma Gorglund's consent to take the little one. Her husband seemed not to care one way or the other; he had never much taken to Ma's *enfant*. It must have seemed a little odd, at that, to propose a long boat trip with a child only a little over two years old. But at last she consented.

We took our time, cruising just off shore. The first evening we put in to the mouth of a stream and made camp. It was a weird sensation to sit in the firelight with a three-foot-high being who talked like a young collegian in a clear, thin voice. But the eeriness of it was dwarfed by the speculations to which it gave rise. If children no older than a ten-year-old Earthling talked like that on the far

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planet from which this diminutive creature came, then what, I thought, must be the depth and magnitude of wisdom of that planet's elders!

It was the next afternoon when we came in sight of the village. I could almost feel the little fellow's eagerness as he strained forward to see ahead, and his bright, dancing black eyes gave me a real joy in being able to bring such a measure of pleasure into his loneliness.

Only two people, a young man and a girl, were on the shore when we put in to the wooden wharf. I gave my hand to my tiny companion as he scrambled out.

And then it happened.

The girl on shore screamed shrilly and, throwing an arm over her eyes, ran blindly toward the village. At the same moment the man began to laugh raucously, holding his sides and rocking with his laughter.

I felt the little hand slip from mine and wheeled to find my companion clambering back into the boat. I followed and turned the nose about. He crouched out of sight in the stern as we made for the open lake. I could hear his thin, dry sobbing and then suddenly it ceased. I swung around in the seat. He was crouched in the stern, staring toward the receding line of the village. When he turned and came up to the seat beside me there was such a look of abject hatred in his eyes as I have never seen in another creature's.

I had dreamed idly, on the downward trip, of making this the first of a series of adventures which would introduce Ma Gorglund's *enfant*, bit by bit, to the world beyond the lake. I knew now that it was no use. Strangely enough, his attitude to me seemed unchanged, but I knew that the day had left its mark.

I tried in every way to make it up to him in the days that followed. As a sort of penance, I even stayed on at the cabin a week longer than I had planned.

It was that year, after I got home, that I wrote the letter to the head of the department of science at our university. I tore up a dozen drafts; then it came to me that the only thing was to write the facts baldly and bluntly. When I had finished I mailed the letter at once, before indecision could halt me. I was glad when it was done; I knew I could never screw up my courage to write another.

The letter was never answered.

In the years that followed I continued to go regularly to the Gorglund's cabin. It was odd, each year that I returned, to find the little green fellow a good five years older. It was apparent by then, even to the Gorglunds, that this was no ordinary creature. But they had grown accustomed to his presence and Ma Gorglund, with her instinctive way of meeting life on its own terms, was quite willing to accept the little fellow as he was without asking questions of herself or others. But I noticed that her husband spent as much time as possible away from the cabin.

It was not many years before I knew, when I met the creature again, that I was in the presence of a man

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older than myself. But long before that time came he was not only far wiser than me, but far more learned than any man I have known. Unlike the rest of us, he needed only the smallest fragment of fact for that lucid, logical mind to reconstruct and understand the whole structure of which those facts were a part.

I could not help realizing that, in even our lightest conversation, my strange friend was definitely having to talk down to me.

With his radio and the books and periodicals which I saw that he received regularly, he was aware of events over the whole face of the troubled earth. More and more, as those events darkened toward a tragic climax, a gloom and a bitterness seemed to fasten upon him. At times that abject hatred I had seen on that long-ago day in the boat came back into his eyes. It was a terrible, frightening thing to see such hatred for humankind in the face of a being who must, in the nature of things, hold more dangerous knowledge than the wisest and most learned of men.

Then, suddenly, a man in Potsdam sent his gray hordes across the borders of Poland and in the East other men sharpened swords for fanatical battle. I was no longer a young man, but I managed to convince the powers that be that there was a place in a mechanized war for a man who knew farm machinery backward and forward.

For year I did not see the cabin again.

Then, as suddenly, the gray hordes collapsed and the awful power of atomic energy blasted the last fortunes and will of the little men with swords.

It was in the months after my return that my thoughts turned more and more frequently to that cabin at the head of a wilderness lake and the unbelievable mystery it held. I found myself remembering, at the oddest moments, that terrible, implacable hatred staring from black little eyes in a green-hued face. All about me I heard men discussing man's imperfect mastery of the atom, fearful of the problems and decisions it posed. And I began to recall, bit by bit, the strange odds and ends which I had purchased in the years before the war at the request of that dwarfed figure. Oddments which bore names in unfamiliar scientific jargon and meant nothing to me. Scraps of this and that ordered from Toronto and Vancouver, New York and Pittsburgh and Detroit. Nothing of any value. When I thought of the millions being spent by the world's researchers, I had to laugh at the weird fears which were growing upon me.

There was relief in the laughter, but the fears grew. For mankind, I knew, was stumbling and blundering now as the ancestors of that wizened little one-time companion of mine must have stumbled and blundered a hundred-thousand, two-hundred-thousand years ago.

I was afraid, and the fear grew.

The day I shucked out of my uniform I told myself that I would never go back to the Gorglund cabin. It was as though the war years had freed me from some monstrous, evil

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spell.

But the resolution was forgotten. I had to go back.

So, a week ago, I went back.

This time I flew almost to the village at the foot of the lake. I learned little at the village. They had come by now to resent me as someone connected in an unaccountable way with the vague mystery at the head of the lake. I sometimes envy the people of the lake country. Something in the silence and grandeur of their land seems to give them a dignity and a poise and a friendliness that I am afraid most of us lack. But they are human, after all, and so they reacted to that unnamed thing at the lake's source just as people in New York or Siloam Springs, Agua Caliente or Frederickstown or Trois Rivieres, would have done.

There is an aquaplane, surplus from the coast patrol, in service on the lake now and it deposited me at the Gorglund wharf, more rotted with the years.

The passing years had always been kind to the Gorglunds, but now I saw that both of them were very old. And with a start, I realized that Ma Gorglund's *enfant* was incredibly old, too. Fifteen years now since that day I stood with the Gorglunds at his crib. Reckoning his age by Earth measures, he would be more than seventy-five years old now. The little hands were withered and the greenish hue had dulled to a mottled grayish-blue. The old hatred, augmented a hundredfold, was in the beady black eyes.

I no longer felt at home. The old days at the cabin were forever dead.

Old Gorglund took me aside beyond the cabin door as I left.

"Something bad here now," he said in a hoarse, cracking voice. "Something most bad. I not understand. Nobody understand. But that devil, he know."

I heard a rustling and whirled to see an angry green face, flushed with hatred, peering at us from the brush.

There is a new house on the point above the Gorglund's now. I caught the pilot at supper there and flew back with him to the village. It was late and I spent the night there.

I slept late the next day for I could not get out of the place until evening. But by then Raoul Sharbonnet's new putterboat had skittered to the wharf and I had heard Raoul's story. Old Gorglund was dead.

It was an accident, Raoul told me as we sped back toward the headwaters. The old man had stumbled on a back path beyond the cabin. The fall broke his neck.

In the Gorglund cabin Ma Gorglund repeated that story.

For just a moment I thought I saw doubt in her eyes.

"Was anyone with him?" I asked.

"The — child was with him," she said.

Then her jaw hardened.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it was accident. I know it was accident."

Raoul went on to the house on the point, which is the store for the upper lake region now.

"See you there," he told me.

When the old lady was sound

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asleep, I faced the aged, wrinkled gnome from another world in the shadow-splotched lantern light.

"I think I know now," he said, "why I am here on this evil, restless, poisoned world of yours."

For a moment, in the wavering light, his old love for me seemed to shine again in the black little eyes. Then it was gone and they were hard once more, full of hatred.

"When you, in this world of yours," he said, his thin voice cold and hard as his black eyes, "find a thing or a place that breeds plague and threatens you, you destroy that place, don't you?

"Isn't that what you do?" he snapped. Despite the thinness of that little voice, it was suddenly very like the voice of the fanatical enemy major who questioned me as a prisoner.

"That is why I am here," he said. "To destroy a plague spot in the universe. They were very wise, the old ones who left me here. They knew that when I had understood your world I would judge it, and when I had judged, I would know what to do. It is a pity this world of yours could not have gone on for a while. There was much of good in it once. Something interesting might have developed in time even here. But now the evil in your world outweighs the good. And so you have become a threat, a plague spot in the universe."

I knew then what I had to do.

He divined my intention. But I was quick. I caught the frail little neck in my fist and held him at arm's length. I knew I had only to close my fingers. I knew that the fate of the world lay literally in my hand.

I tried not to look at the little form in my grip; tried to remember that it was the lives of millions, billions of Earthmen against this one alien life.

But I knew that I could not do it, that it was not in me to do it.

I loosened my hold and set him down.

For a long moment there was silence in the cabin. I stared at him and he stared back at me. That implacable hate in his black eyes glowed out at me, but somehow it didn't seem the same. He still liked me; I could see it. Apparently my impulse to kill him had changed nothing in that amazing mentally-controlled set of emotions of his. Was it the fact that he seemed to like me even better now that made me wonder about his hate . . . ?

He seemed to be thinking deeply. His wrinkled face grew even more wrinkled around the eyes. He was looking into my eyes deeply, pondering about something. I wondered uncomfortably whether he possessed some strange means of killing me; was reflecting whether he should begin his elimination of the human race with me.

He turned suddenly, without a word, and left the cabin. A feeling of helplessness filled me. I knew what I should have done, but I just couldn't have done it. No matter what the cost, I could not be a murderer. I walked leadenly to the doorway, stood looking out into the gathering dusk. The little fellow was nowhere in sight. The minutes passed.

Suddenly there was a blinding blue

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light that grew until it seemed all the lightnings of the world had gathered at one spot. Following the glare came a roar of a thousand thunders. The sound beat on my ears like the blast of many tons of dynamite.

This was it! This was the end!

That diabolic little *poupon* had set off the fearful energies that would destroy this wicked planet that he considered a plague spot!

Beside me, Ma Gorglund stood, panic in her eyes, awakened by the fearful blast of sound.

"What is it?" she screamed at me, clutching my arm. "What is happening?"

"Death!" I said dully. "He's set something terrible off — "

Out of the forest a half-mile away a column of smoke rose, arcing up into the night sky. At its head was a tiny pinpoint of light that swept up and up until it disappeared into the void. Then silence came.

I stared unbelievingly.

"What is it?" Ma Gorglund asked, hesitantly.

In my mind there was a soundless, piping voice, faroff, almost an illusion, not but quite. *The plague will die; the anti-toxin of such as you will kill it. I am glad that I was wrong. . .* The imagined — or was it imagined? — voice died away in my mind.

"The *poupon*," I said, putting my arm around Ma's shoulder. "He's gone. Gone with the lightning, the way he came. Everything's all right . . . now."

THE END

LETTERS

(Continued from page 139)

I like your editorial policy. You aren't scared to name names and say what you think. That was a nice tribute to Howard Browne, the new editor of *Amazing Stories*, and to *Amazing*. Also I like your policy of trying all kinds of things to find out what we the readers like.

I find it interesting for the editor to pick out his favorite story of the issue. This issue I agree with you in picking *To Give Them Welcome*, but not because of the babies! I liked the conflict of the two reporters Dave and Jenny, and the happy ending!

R. F. D. No. 1,
West Townsend, Mass.

Maybe your editor will try to pick his idea of the best story in this issue. Let's see, how about making it a tie between The Wee Bonnie Poupon; Lady; *and* Punishment Without Crime? *This is the first time in twelve years that we've been stuck on the question of naming a "first." Actually, we give the first mentioned story a shade the edge.—Ed.*

Jonathan Saville

I have just finished looking through the second issue of OTHER WORLDS (my first, since I missed the opening number) and I really am surprised. I have been reading *Astounding Science Fiction* (I'm glad you don't mind the mentioning of other magazines) for a long time and I never expected to see any other publication even comparable to it. I enjoyed the magazine tremendously, but (and there always is one) I would like to offer a few suggestions. First of all, keep the size, the straight edges, the Personals, and the editorial—these are all good. Secondly, please don't pattern OW after *Amazing Stories*. If you can't be original (which is pretty hard) at least, use a good magazine, namely *Astounding*, as your model. (I'm talking about the format, not the stories. It takes time for good authors to start contributing

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to a new publication.) The inside artwork leaves much room for improvement, and the cover, while pretty, is not artistic. Be careful about the letter columns; don't let it degenerate like it has in some other magazines (SS and TWS) to a repository of the epistles of slang-happy, out-of-work embodiments of Richard Shaver. A column of this sort is for the readers, not the writers. Remember that and maybe the letters will stay sane.

1006 Gerard Ave.,
New York 52, N. Y.

It has long been our opinion that the idea SS and TWS has about the way its reader letter column should be handled is due to a misinterpretation of just how to get "down to earth" with the reader. Instead of being "chummy" they are "slapstick." There is a difference between "getting in with the gang" and being a "comedian." We never could go for this "Heigh ho, my fine rocketeers, this is your old Sergeant Saturn riding the gravs at you!" Please, Sam Merwin, won't you change that? We remember the conversation we had with you in New York recently, and we left with the impression you were a fine editor. You've done wonders since you took over, but maybe you've not gone deeply enough into the letter department? We suggest that you pep up that department a little, because, actually, we're beginning to like TWS and SS a lot. Naturally, this is all in a friendly spirit, and since many of our readers like TWS and SS also, the mags might as well be as good as they can be. Okay, Sam?—Ed.

Lawrence Miller

I would like to call your attention to a highly significant fact. Of the half-dozen or more science fiction anthologies to be published presently, all follow a certain well-defined pattern. About half of the stories chosen are from *Astounding;* a smaller percentage come from *Wonder* and *Startling;* one or two (no more) from *Planet,* and a smattering from odd corners.

Now, maybe *Amazing* will not release copyrights, but even if they did, the sad truth is that *Amazing* just isn't printing genuine sf.

The reason for mentioning this lies in the fact that you seem to be following fairly closely to the pattern laid down by *Amazing.* The specific complaints? Surely. There is no science in your stories (mentioning that a spaceship is capable of ten thousand miles per hour is not science. It isn't even good sense). You seem to have fallen into the lurid, sexy, juvenile-plot cycle of stories for which you and Richard Shaver are responsible.

Of course, if your personal S. O. S. to Bradbury, Sprague de Camp, Campbell, Sturgeon, Williamson, Del Rey and Van Vogt should bring results, I'll take back everything I said. But did you notice that all of the aforesaid masterminds were developed by *Astounding,* except two, and one of those is piloting the mag? Significant?

3130 Bapaume Ave.,
Norfolk 9, Virginia

Now, maybe you're right. Or partly so. It is true the anthologies ignore Amazing, *but we talked to some of those who got them together, and they admitted they didn't* consider *Amazing, because of its reputation among the fan clubs. They admitted this wasn't fair. However, it is true that* Astounding's *yarns are better suited to anthologies.* Amazing *did release its copyrights, and there were many of its stories selected for past anthologies. Derleth selected a good proportion.*

However, we predict that OTHER WORLDS will get a fair percentage of anthology spots in the future. Don't judge us, or Ray Palmer, by Amazing's *past performance; don't even judge* Amazing's *future performance by its past — Howard Browne is making many, many changes. After all, Palmer aimed primarily at a top circulation, and quality be hanged. In OTHER WORLDS, we don't want top circulation, and we do want quality. As for Shaver, he can do quality science fiction, and we'll leave that, also, to the future.*

You'll notice we DID get Van Vogt, and Bradbury. The rest will follow. We doubt if Campbell will write for us, but if he does, we'll try to write for Campbell! If he'd agree, we'd try to swap stories each would find acceptable, no matter who wrote them! And we feel Palmer would be the guy on the barrel on a deal like that— but he's game to try it!

Yes, Campbell and Williamson got their start in Amazing. *Sturgeon and Bradbury have appeared there often. We'd say* Amazing *did fairly well on that deal!*

Significant? Yes, we think so!—Ed.

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She lifted her unearthly voice in a song of utter abandon. Creature of the Flame she was, revealing before us the flame of her seemingly molten body. We were struck blind.

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MARAI'S WIFE

By EDWIN BENSON

Periodically, said a legend among the old space dogs, a strange flame coursed the spacelanes, bringing new life forms to planets that had never seen life before; siren life forms of terrifying beauty . . .

THE OLD FELLOW was a porter known to none by any name but "the ghost." On such off-limits space ports as Carnoon the weird wrecks of humanity accumulate, flung off by the furious tide of growth that is space travel today. Of all of them "the ghost" was the most silent, the most mysterious, and the most completely pitiable in his white-faced resignation to complete despair. One knew his story, one thought, first sight of him—a man cut off forever from his home planet, from all desire for life, from life itself, detached of everything but his own silent pain.

He passed through the lounging room where we loafed, the night of the departure of the big freighter *Ido,* bending to remove the waste cans. We were talking idly, and a young smooth cheeked A.B. was discoursing scornfully of the old space legend of the "Path of the Life-flame."

"The old space-dogs make up such stuff, and tell it over and over till they believe it themselves," he was saying.

"The ghost" suddenly stopped his quiet, weary work, and straightened as if stung. From somewhere a hint of color touched his thin cheeks, and the placid death that lay in his eyes began to burn with a cold fire.

His dead man's eyes fixed the youth with an icy stare, his blue lips moved, his throat worked—and after what seemed minutes to the suddenly timid A.B., his voice began to chant.

It was a sensation such as you get when someone who knows how recites *The Ancient Mariner.* You know—you don't want to listen and you can't get away. It was a rhythmic, alien voice, and it went on and on—Hardly a man stirred at first, fascinated suddenly to find a fierce living voice emanating from a body we had so long regarded as one already dead.

I can't give it to you in his words,

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for he was speaking space—pidgin, with a few words of his own tongue mixed up with it—and the place he came from I never heard mentioned by anyone else. There are many little known planets that have contributed their strange individual quotas to the stream of travelers across the voids—and his was not known to any of us.

He started off about some leader he called "Marai," without preamble or preparation, so I'll give it to you just as he did to us.

Marai was my leader and my friend. He knew the Path of Flame. It is a true thing!

The flame surges forever through the void of far space. Where my own world is—there it is known. Marai sought it out.

On a dead world far ahead of the speeding tide of life-bringing flame, Marai set his traps for what might be caught from the passing. Little traps, tiny glow-worms in glass bell jars, with spring tops to shut on the curious, questing things sure to come.

Some big ones, too! Curiously decorated great glass houses, he built, with puzzling colored lights moving on wires, and involved mixtures of scents out-flowing from the jaws of the trap. These big ones Marai was sure would trap one or more of the advanced types of beings who followed the track of the life flame . . .

Marai rubbed his hands together greedily, anticipating success as he stood surveying the finished work. It was good work. The most active mind would never see the hidden threat of the traps he had built. Nor find a way out, once in!

Then Marai retreated, and closed tight the great metal door of his hiding place. Some of that oncoming tide of space life he had no desire to meet, nor no mind to face and overcome their anger, should they sense his presence.

Marai stood for a moment, watching his own reflection on the sparkling surface of the unactivated viewscreen. Proud he was of his courage, for few enough were the creatures of his kind who had braved the life-flame and survived unchanged or returned to tell the tale. But here, in his long planned stronghold, nothing of the life of the flame's formidable life forms could get at him—and like the great rulers of old time he might survive and retain captive some creature which ever after would serve him, and him alone.

There had been Margaid, his greatly renowned ancestor. Had he not braved the former passing, six centuries ago? Had he not brought from its depths the captive *gringreor,* that bit of pulsing grey-and-gold matter that could divine the future? And *did* it not foretell his rise to power! Step by step it had led him on to greatness, out of the bigness of its love for life forgiving him the sin of its own capture.

There were other tales Marai had heard, of the weird women of the flame, and of those who had acquired power through power over them—or through their kindness. But of such tales there was no way of corrobora-

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tion, even though Margaid had left writings that confirmed the story. And at his death there had been the death of the grey-and-gold creature of the light, a strange miracle even in its passing exactly at the time of Margaid's death. That had been written into the history books of that time; one could find it in many an old tome.

Marai glanced at the time marked off on the rim of the sparkling viewplate; the creeping glow had almost reached the mark. He looked into his own white face reflected above the time-mark, the pale flame of yellow hair waving above the dark deep-set eyes, the long thin hands set tense upon the levers. Sighing, he consciously strove against the tension and relaxed.

Easily, he turned the great wheel, and upon the sparkling plates the dark depths of space afar came clear to his vision. Intently he watched the growing, spiraling cloud of speeding fluid flame, passing along its ancient route, nearing steadily. The greatest mystery of his universe, this speeding potent well-spring of new life forms—was it a God within the weird rosy glow of its vast spiraling folds? Or was it just a primal gathering of sentient energies, so filled with life that wherever they passed other life sprang and took root and lived on after the passing?

It was said that his own race came from a seed cast forth from the flame, and it was considered a crime against God to approach too near its path. But Marai had little sympathy with such beliefs, stifling as they were to all learning, all natural curiosity.

On it came, growing swiftly, blotting out the darkness of the far void with its rosy glow, its dancing myriads of fiery shapes a-swim within its potent fields.

Its glory poured out of the viewplate upon Marai, a beauty and a sentience incredible and insupportable, too vast properly to sense and evaluate. Within the heart of the spiraling shape moved beauty incredibly *alive,* moved thinking and joying and being beyond life's puny experience, and the seeing of it even so far off was an ecstasy beyond one's strength. Marai shut off the view plate, and his hands relaxed upon the lever. Since he could not bear to look, better to just sit and wait for it to pass, then see what had been caught of its attendant swarming miracles.

It was terriffic temptation, almost impossible to resist, to sit there while he knew that outside was passing the greatest mystery of the universe. Yet he knew that to open his viewplate would be to expose his mind to influences too strong to resist, to expose his nerves to impulses too great for them to bear, to blast his mind apart with the outpouring energies of the flame.

But even as he sensed the passing, knew it was now at its height, the tides of life force whelming over this bare rock in its path—a terrific command came from beyond the bolted metal he had built with such labor.

Powerful, it was yet subtle with a lure to his senses, full of a sweetness and a strangeness that drew his

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curiosity, full of a pulsing invitation to a dance that he knew would never end for him if he answered and unbarred that door.

"Come, Marai," said the weird voice outside. "Come and join us. Know the ecstasy which fills our days, know what it means to partake of infinite energies, know what it means to pass beyond ordinary life into the greater life. Come, Marai!"

"No!" answered Marai. "My ambitions lie another path than yours. I want none of your intoxication with the flame; I want power and wealth in my own world and my own time. Go away, or remain and help me.

The voice went away, to be replaced by another and another. Still, the sweat streaming down his face, Marai resisted the importuning sirenlike voices that, peri-like, pierced into his hideaway, danced their projected visions before him, only to give up before his stupid stubbornness and swim away to rejoin the great flame that was their source of life.

He had not expected them to sense his presence, and he was mentally unprepared for their complete awareness of him and his purpose and his whereabouts. Sitting there, he doubted that his traps, thus exposed, would catch anything.

Then came a greater, yet softer voice than any previous, saying with a woman's liquid, singing tones:

"Marai! I am she who comes to fulfill your quest! I know what you seek, and I am weary of this endless round—open and let me in to you! You will not be sorry, and I do not expect you to follow us. I want to remain with you. Open!"

Marai unbarred the door to the sweet voice, his face flushed with longing for the promise that was infinitely more than mortal love in that voice. His limbs leaped to obey her request, and his eyes bulged with longing to see the beauty he knew must be hers who owned that voice.

The great door swung slowly back. Beyond, in the darkness of the rocky tunnel, she must be waiting. Marai peered, his eyes seeing only the blackness. Then slowly the shape became visible, as a spirit materializing from some otherwhere, standing there white and stark and naked in her alien, terrible beauty. Terrible because the vast reaches and mysteries of the dark cold of space were in her *innate self*. Terrible because of the dark and alien knowledge that was hers. Terrible because no man ever born was created to withstand the impact of the energies she held within her. Marai stared, and his knees quivered, weakened, let his tall strength slide slowly to the floor in complete surrender. His senses left him.

Marai came back to consciousness to find himself upon his own couch. Beside him sat a cloaked figure, his own cloak wrapped about her. Her head was covered with the hood of his cloak, and only the deep eyes of her upon him—only the round, high line of her forehead was visible. Marai turned his eyes from hers, his head swimming with new weakness.

"Do not look, Marai! After a time you will grow more able to bear the

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sight of my body."

Marai whispered, scarce audible to his own ears.

"Not your body, dear creature. I cannot bear the strength of that which in others would be called beauty, and is in you *the self*."

"I am strange to you, then? You have never met my kind before?"

"Never. I sought you out because of the tales about my ancestor, one named Margaid. He caught one of you long centuries ago, and she made him great."

"Perhaps I too, can make you great," murmured that voice of utter womanness. The glance of her eyes sent Marai on a swoop toward Paradise. From somewhere came a welling of strength to bear the pleasure that was so great as to be pain, and Marai returned her look until she drew the hood of the cloak again across the dark wells of power, deep set with little diamond points of flame, and released him from their spell.

The return of Marai from his hunting trip to the forbidden path of the flame was a furtive maneuver. It was only by gradual stages that the triumph of Marai came to be whispered about among those who walk in secret, and speak in whispers of things foreboding change.

His ship was a silver ghost fluttering down the night, her dynes muttering softly on the statro setting. Cushioning ion flow beneath, Marai slipped between the slow sweep of the search beams like a purposeful moon wraith, dropped to earth among the tall melsa trees of his own estate.

The woman who followed him from the ship and between the stone gate pillars of his own courtyard, seeming to move without feet as move the mist men, was an unnoticed miracle to those who saw Marai stalk into his stronghold that night. But not unnoticed for long, for no man can conceal what no man can approach without startling change within his inner being.

Looking back, the strangest thing of all, to Marai, was that men came to call the stranger "Marai's wife." Came to accept the miracle of her as normal and human and right. For to Marai, she was anything but what he had expected in a wife.

He learned very soon that there was no chance of hiding his treasure, for but a glimpse of her in the distance was enough to anchor any male visitor to the place for days, on the chance of another glimpse. For which poor bemused males Marai had only pity, and no rancor—was he not himself the most enslaved of all?

His numerous traps had netted Marai, from the creatures of the flame, but two captives—aside from the woman. These she told him were new-born, and ignorant of any life but that of the ancient path, hence had fallen prey to his crude snares. But they would develop marvelous powers, Marai knew, and spent much time on their care.

One was a spiny ball of jeweled intricacy, with a little pulsing nucleus peering out of the protective iridescence of the spines. The other was a serpentine form, ivory white, with-

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out eyes but equipped with soft undeveloped antler-like growths which served it both as eyes, ears—and other senses unknown to men.

These it was necessary to keep completely concealed from the eyes of all but his closest intimates. For the ancient law against trespass along the way of the flame was still enforced by those whom Marai somewhat unwillingly regarded as his rulers.

Marai kept them in the deep chambers beneath his rockwalled stronghold. There, in an atmosphere completely insulated by the depth of the rock base on which his house was builded, Marai could maintain a temperature and humidity natural to them. The pulsing of the dynamos which generated about their prison a field of energy containing some of the qualities found only in the pathway went unnoticed there in the depths, and they were safe from prying eyes and ears.

Marai's wife walked his halls veiled in white and her beauty and its power came to be a legend to which few indeed could testify—except to remark that certainly a treasure kept so well concealed must be of greater value than those openly revealed.

Veiled and swathed she sat at Marai's side at his board, never lifting the soft transparencies behind which the growing fame of her features kept mystery. Tall as Marai's figure, her own was lithe and slim beside him when he stood to receive guests, her own slight gestures of greeting received with even more honor than Marai's own warm welcome.

In Marai's world there were countries where women were not allowed to partake of food in the presence of men. The fact that she was never seen to take food was regarded as an indication of personal adherence to some custom of that kind. There were countries in which women never revealed their features to anyone but their husband, and the behavior of Marai's wife was to most but a foreigner's strange ways—and no real mystery. The fact of the growing power of Marai—due mainly to the increasing number of rich young men who chose the heretofore almost humble country landowner as their leader, as a kind of lord and mentor and center of their activities—was a mystery in itself eclipsing all others in the growing rumors about the home and the ways of Marai.

That each of these men carried in his heart a strange flame, hypnotic and compelling, binding him to the place where the white veils of Marai's wife might be even occasionally glimpsed was a fact disregarded in the multiplicity of strange facts that seemed true of Marai's house alone.

But these facts began to accumulate about Marai in a strange and somewhat wonderful confusion of opulence. That is, at first. Then, later, the weird compulsion in which he and all about him moved to some pattern whose source was only vaguely sensed, became an increasingly irksome bond upon him. Irksome, not because unpleasant or ill of result, but because of the inevitability of success of even his least whims and plans.

The earlier and humbler Marai

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would never have dreamed that success itself could become a burden. But there is in all men a gambling spirit, a will to risk and laugh at the inevitable loss that must occur to all who risk. And Marai found himself awaiting a loss that never occurred, straining with an increasing tension to perceive one flaw in the pattern of success that began to chain him to his ledgers and his conferences.

The overlords of the ancient land began to look askance at this magnet in the barren hills toward which young blood and wealth flowed in increasing streams. Always their own fleshpots and city lures had drawn the strength of the land to themselves—and now some unknown lure was catching fish regarded by them as rightfully their due. Some unknown power was draining off their wealth and their manpower, and depositing it about some precipitation point inexplicable and invisible to their most cunning spies.

I saw Marai's wife when I went to Malpasse, as the high valley between the mountains that is Marai's estate is known. I saw her first as I entered his hall, standing white and still and ghostlike beside him. His dress was green velvet, slashed with gold at sleeve and thigh, and the eerie woman beside him struck me with a dread and a doubt of my own eyesight. But that passed in an instant—and a different feeling came to me from her, a fiery pulsing into my inner mind that did not pulse and die, but pulsed and stayed and grew as a spark taking fire in tinder.

That fiery feeling was not love as I had come to think of love. It was instead a sensation such as one might have when peering over an abyss, and that abyss filled with a seething lava, and swimming in that lava a naked female, beckoning. A sensation a man might have from no other known source, too alien to classify, yet utterly fascinating, and utterly beyond normal experience. It was invitation, and warning, and wisdom beyond one's own, and utter delight to the vague inner fingers of thought. It was a flame irresistible, and I leaped to obey the invitation even while my flesh quivered with fear of the unknown, even while the eyes assured one that the veils about her contained a form graceful beyond normal grace, and feminine beyond all my experience of feminine form.

Marai's glowing face, written over with an unearthly happiness, was the face of a man walking in his sleep, and that sleep filled with a dream greater than mere living could ever be.

One desired terribly to make one's way into that dream that obsessed Marai's soul, and feared vastly that the way was barred. One wanted her, feared her, and from that meeting onward obeyed her unspoken desires as a more important voice than one's own will. Sensed her desires, her thoughts, subtly replacing one's own thinking, sensed them with a sinking weakening of the free will—but obeyed!

The reward of that obedience, always withheld, always subtly promised, was such tremendous lure as to paralyze all thoughts of other desire

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than the desire for but one word from her unseen lips.

Enviously we followed Marai, unwillingly we attached our fortunes to his own, but obediently and gladly we obeyed her unspoken commands.

High adventure, vaulting ambition, endless endeavor, duty and courage and love for our country—all such concepts in our minds swiftly became something else—and that something the will of Marai's wife.

Strange that so few of us ever puzzled it all out till afterward. Strange that we never questioned what her purpose, what her design tended toward accomplishing *for herself*. Strange we so seldom even attempted to analyze her nature, or to take by stealth what seemed impossible to acquire by consent. Strange that none of our wild young barbarian crew ever attempted to abduct her, to make her ours willy-nilly. That is a question I will answer when I die.

Looking back I cannot understand why she remained among us for the period that she did, nor why she gave her time to pleasuring our continual plaguing her for more of her harp music, for just one more song.

It seems to me now that she must have been a creature of infinite pity, and that pity wrung to the quick by our own poverty of mind, by our starved souls crying out for the beauty that she alone could give amply and in full measure.

It was that infinite pity in her innately soft heart, hidden so deep beneath the calm exterior, that made her at the last reveal her great beauty. It was that act that brought on the final tragedy, and it was her pity that moved her to the act in spite of her wisdom which knew no man could look on her without terrible harm.

Or was it cruelty, was it boredom and complete abandon to the whim of the moment?

Stricken as I was by the deed, made into the thing I am today, living only to warn you of her kind, I still cannot believe she meant us ill.

It happened on the day of our greatest triumph. Granor the Third, who styled himself King without legality that I know of, had determined to nip the growing might of Marai's forces in the hills above his own chief city. He had come upward at the head of some five thousand assorted troops, and our first heralding of the attack was the bombing which nearly leveled Malpasse fortress. Only Marai's wife, forewarning us, saved us by leading us downward into the ancient dungeons beneath the place. Only Margaid's ancient weapons, brought out by the awakened and vengeful Marai, enabled us to sally out in the gray morning, but a fifth of Granor's strength, and drive the oncoming armored tanks back from the pass. And only the counsel of the nameless woman drove us, by force of irrefutable logic, to risk the counter-attack that culminated in Granor's utter rout and the taking of his city of Feelsh.

We were all deep in the spell of her will, that day, and that night, as we gathered in what had been Granor's throne room. We were like men slowly awakening from a dream. A dream

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which had been fierce and intense beyond reality, but a dream in which the self had been submerged in a greater self.

It was then, in the relief and the exaltation of her triumph—her triumph that was vividly known to all of us as *her* triumph and ourselves and Marai himself but passengers upon her ship of inexplicable ambition. It was there, in that vulgarly ornate opulence of Granor's gold and red throne room that she removed her veils and stood upon the dais of Granor's vacant throne and lifted that unearthly voice in a song of utter abandon to the surging, wild emotions of a woman who has never been a woman, but a thing not human. Creature of the Flame that she was, revealing before us the terrific flame of her seemingly molten body, Marai himself blinded beside her by the sudden exhalations of force, each of us now realized the nature of her was beyond all possibility of union with man of our kind. We realized it even as the fire of her laughter and flaming beauty of face and form and swelling thigh and alien curve and grace blasted at our own puny beings with surging aural flames, even as we reached and struggled toward her—and fell weakly to the floor unable to withstand the power of it. Fell and did not rise, but lay and listened to the utter beauty of her weird immortal song throbbing over the scene.

It was then she left, stepping over us where we lay, gliding outward, our blinded eyes following her unseeing, but knowing—with a terrible sense of imminent loss—she would never return.

So, do not follow the tides that birth such as her, youth. Listen not to the siren song, touch not the rudder of the ship that nears the path, hunger not after the nameless women of the Flame. Their path is not our path, and our life way is not theirs. Such women are for the wild unbounded strength of the race that bore them, and not for feeble men of the barren worlds.

Let us think that in the excitement she forgot what would occur. That is better than to think that our destruction was her purpose among us, that playing with our puny souls was her whole desire from the beginning and that at last she tired of the game.

THE END

A. E. VAN VOGT

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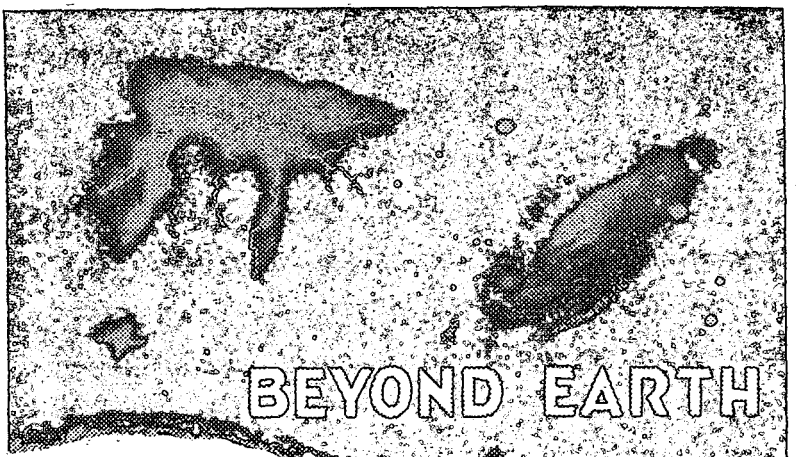

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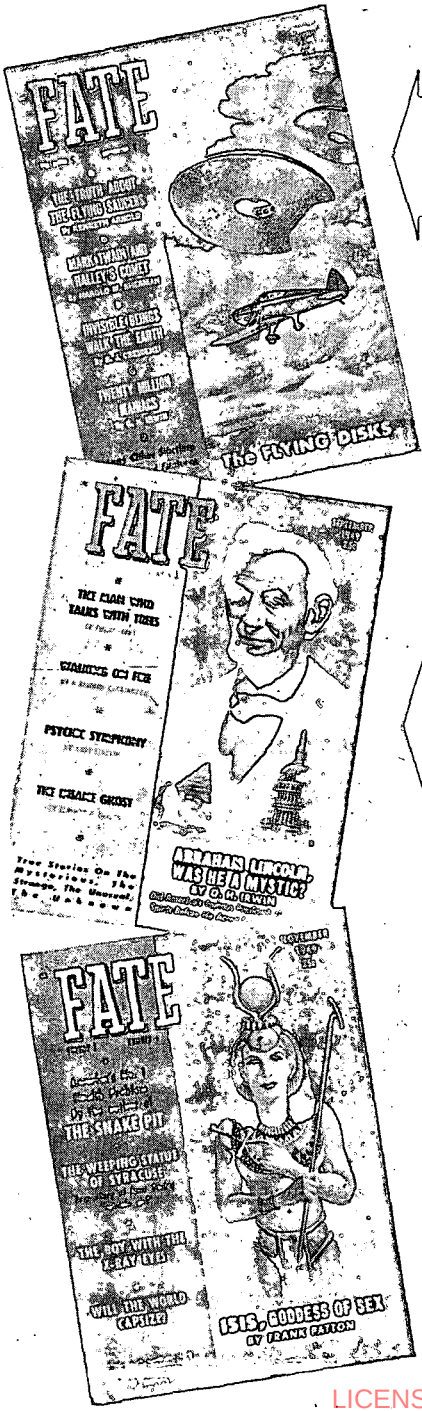

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